JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)

ILLUSTRATION BY SIDU

HIBIYA
KONOHA

MARIE KANO

KIDO
MOMO

ENE
SHINTARO

KAGEROU DAZE

VOLUME 1: **IN A DAZE**

JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)
ILLUSTRATED BY SIDU

YEN ON

NEW YORK

Copyright

KAGEROU DAZE, Volume 1
JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)

Translation by Kevin Gifford
Cover art by SIDU

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

Kagerou Daze -in a daze-
©2012–2014 KAGEROU PROJECT/ 1st PLACE

Edited by BOOKWALKER Co., Ltd.

First published in Japan in 2012 by KADOKAWA CORPORATION ENTERBRAIN.

English translation rights arranged with KADOKAWA CORPORATION, Tokyo. through TUTTLE-MORI AGENCY, INC., Tokyo.

English translation © 2015 by Yen Press, LLC.

All rights reserved. In accordance with the U.S. Copyright Act of 1976, the scanning, uploading, and electronic sharing of any part of this book without the permission of the publisher is unlawful piracy and theft of the author's intellectual property. If you would like to use material from the book (other than for review purposes), prior written permission must be obtained by contacting the publisher. Thank you for your support of the author's rights.

Yen On
1290 Avenue of the Americas
New York, NY 10104
yenpress.com

Yen On is an imprint of Yen Press, LLC.
The Yen On name and logo are trademarks of Yen Press, LLC.

The publisher is not responsible for websites (or their content) that are not owned by the publisher.

First Yen On eBook Edition: May 2015

ISBN: 978-0-316-38468-1

E3-20170111-JV-PC

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Cover
Insert
Title Page
Copyright

Kagerou Daze I
Jinzou Enemy
Kagerou Daze II
Kisaragi Attention
Kagerou Daze III
Mekakushi Chord
Epilogue

Afterword
Yen Newsletter

KAGEROU DAZE I

My eyes are blinded. In an instant, the world flashes to monochrome. Amid it all, the blue of a clear, cloudless sky, and a red…a red sign, and then…! Those two colors alone, bursting in stark contrast, burning themselves deep into my retinas.

This sight now spread out before me—what is this?

The sound of the cicadas' mindless, frenetic cry stabs into my ears.
The smell of iron intermingles with your scent.
Every one of my senses pounds directly into my brain, bypassing my consciousness completely.

A set of tire tracks, burned across the pedestrian crosswalk, along with a line of red, as red as your tiny body. There's nothing I can do, not now, but when I run to the scene anyway, choking heat sears my eyes, my nose, my head, beating the reality home all the more.
This isn't you here.
This isn't the girl I was speaking with just now.
This is just a red lump of something.
I don't care what anyone says. This—this isn't you.

…Nausea wells up in my throat. My head is killing me. My vision blurs like I've opened my eyes underwater, and droplets began to fall, drip by drip, onto the asphalt. They were trickling out, I suppose, from both of my eyes.

I open my mouth, trying to speak, but I couldn't hear a single word. Perhaps my voice was drowned out by the cicadas, or perhaps I never made a sound in the first place.

I have to tell you.
I had finally just resolved to tell you.
I have to tell you now.

The heat haze drifted up from the street, strangely close as it shimmered in the hot air.
It just hung there, ever present, as if laughing at me, as if trying to come between us.

Leave us alone. I'm finally about to tell her.
You can laugh at me all you want later. Just stay out of my way for now.

I know I'm pretty late on this. I know this could make things weird. But you…

your kind of selfish attitude

the way you get violent when someone makes you blush
the way your hair smelled in the breeze
everything

—I loved all of it, and you.

JINZOU ENEMY

I was jarred awake by the sound of a blaring siren. My heartbeat shot upward as I was greeted by the plain white ceiling above me. Still unaware of my surroundings, I flailed around, knocking over the small desk by my side, and fell out of bed.

"…Ngh!"

I banged my right shin, hard. A beat, and then the burning discomfort was relayed to my brain.

My eyes tearing up in fear from the pain and the furious noise, I pulled the sprawled-out comforter toward me, cocooning myself inside. Then the siren stopped.

"Good morning, master!"

The moment I heard that voice, I finally understood the situation I was in.

Here I was, Shintaro Kisaragi, body unnaturally twisted on the floor, clad in underpants and bedsheets, tears in my eyes. And there she was, Ene, looking on from inside the monitor display, tears in *her* eyes as she tried to choke back her laughter.

*

It was the height of summer. Just a little while ago, everyone was going nuts over meteor strikes and the Mayans or whoever predicting the end of the world. Now? It's back to business as usual, the top headlines all stuff like "Guess which breakout idol is about to make her TV drama debut?!"

For someone with a vocation like mine, someone who prides himself on keeping up with the latest news and who engaged in heated front-line debates about the Apocalypse all across the net, I had to admit that *things*, in general, were failing to wow me lately.

Of course, maybe "vocation" is overstating it. Normally, I would be a regular old eighteen-year-old high-school student. But instead I have generously volunteered to remain at home, keeping close watch over my domestic domain during those times when I haven't devoted myself to the free exchange of opinion with other denizens of the Internet. My primary work duties involve creating amateur music, a hobby I started completely from scratch, and posting my erstwhile, insightful reviews, day and night, in the comments section of whatever's just been posted to my preferred video site. I've been on the job for two years.

I haven't quite *made* any songs, keep in mind.

But! But! Look out, world, because today (for a change) I'm ready to *do* this!

Plopping down at my computer desk, I crammed the sandwich my mother supplied me this morning into my mouth and stared at the music sequencer window in front of me. My mission: to reach number one on the video site rankings, to get my song out on ringtones and in karaoke rooms, to release my first major album…!

Basically, I want to be lavished with attention.

Most days, this lofty ambition sadly gets sidetracked, falling to dust after half an hour or so as I push forward with my pressing video-commenter obligations. But no, today will not be like most. This sandwich is filled with more than just my mother's love—there must be something else in it that drives me now, filling me to overflowing with catchy musical riffs, like the Muses themselves have possessed me.

"Oh, this is gonna *explode*!" I said to myself as I began punching in notes. This composition work was going so unbelievably smoothly that it was unnerving. But there was something else flitting around the display—a kind of virus, if you will, one plainly bent on interfering with my mission.

"Looks like it'll be a scorcher today. Wow! They're saying it's gonna get up to ninety-five downtown!"

"Ooh, look out! They've already taken ten or so people to the hospital for heat stroke. Better take ample precautions when you go outside, master!"

I have no idea why anyone would go outside on a day like this.

Though, really, I have no idea why anyone would go outside, period.

"Oh, speaking of which, master, today's siren was an alert used by certain nations in case of threat-level-four-or-higher incidents. I boosted the frequency bands I thought you'd find the most grating, and—"

"The hell do you mean, 'today's siren'? You got one for tomorrow, too…? Uh."

Oh, great. I just *had* to sass back at her.

She had been shifting to and fro across the display, futilely trying to engage me in inane conversation. Now she was stopped, standing tall, the smile providing the cherry to top the look of utter victory on her face. She was front and center on the screen now as she joyfully continued.

"Oops! Guess I let the cat out of the bag! Now I'll have to find something even*more* exciting for tomorrow! Oh, and no need to thank me, of course. Seeing a happy customer's smiling face is all the thanks I need!"

"I didn't ask for a sales rep! You know this is gonna bruise, right? This is aggravated assault we're talking about!"

I pointed out the soon-to-be blunt-force trauma on my shin, plaintively stating my case as she cackled like a witch, furtively rubbing her hands together.

It was a futile effort. A question mark popped up over her head as she tilted her head in a brazen attempt at shocked confusion.

It was August 14th. Three in the morning, by the way. The siren that so suddenly blared across the house had beaten not just myself, but my mother out of bed. She rushed over to my room, only to find her son ranting and raving at this cute virtual cyber-girl on the computer display.

As the shouting intensified, causing far more consternation for the neighbors than any siren, and as I found myself receiving a face-to-fist greeting from good ol' Mom for the effort, morning slowly crept across the landscape.

Which brings us to now. I haven't looked in the mirror yet, but I assumed I had a bruise on my face as well by now.

"Guh. You have got to be kidding me. What the hell am I gonna do if she destroys my computer? I'd, like, die."

"Ohhh, master, you are so kind to me! Putting your concern for me above your own! And you even came right to me the moment you woke up this morning!"

She zoomed herself in on-screen, her eyes shining like a reject from some old shoujo manga. I flew into yet another violent rage.

"Yeah, 'cause I'm gonna delete your ass! If I lose my computer, that's gonna kill *me*, not you!"

"Oh, there you go again! You can't fool me! I know how thoughtful and caring a master you really are. Yep! Every day with you, nothing but bliss!"

This was getting nowhere.

It never, ever gets anywhere with her. I'm sick of it.

How did this wind up happening to me? Let me think…

About a year ago, I received an enigmatic e-mail from an unknown sender. I opened it, something I would never dare do today, and the result made my life the stressful farce it is now.

The moment this thing lurking in the mail attachment wriggled its way into my computer, it commandeered every single square inch of my hard drive.

At the time, I had no idea what had happened. I saw these geometric shapes pop up on my desktop, on top of all the application windows, and then this girl appeared, her blue hair done up in twin pigtails, a faint glow covering her entire body.

I thought it was cute at first. I really did.

It's hard to believe now.

This girl I was suddenly presented with exuded mystery. My mind conjured up images of some distressed heroine going on, like, "Oh, you finally saved me, we must fight together for justice," etc.

It was more than enough for someone like me, a troll in a troll cave, the utter dregs of society, to think I had finally drawn the "world-beating hero" card. The encounter was too perfect, driving me to flights of terribly mistaken fancy. Soon we would be battling a shadowy organization, investigating supernatural incidents nationwide, uniting with our stalwart band of friends as we fought off hideous monsters! The first episode of a rip-snorting adventure!

But.

No supernatural incidents took place. Remarkably, I didn't grow a magical demon eye or anything. A band of friends was out of the question; I was lucky if I could get my mail-order packages delivered right. Monsters? Well, there were some cockroaches. And I don't think I ever heard of an adventure tale where the first line was: "Oh, uh, nice to meet you!" Followed by: "Uh, yeah…"

To start out, I told her about my life. Nothing too deep, but at least we could still sustain a normal conversation back then.

"Could I ask who you are?" I said. I was taking pains to be polite to her for some reason. "It's just that I've never heard of any kind of software package like this."

"Well," she replied, "I don't really know myself." A lot of that kind of thing.

And that, really, was a lot healthier than now. I could ask her things, and she'd actually give me a reply.

But I guess she got used to things after about a week. Her behavior grew notably more bizarre, and she began to both interfere with my noble work and just plain screw around with me. She renamed the folder with all my embarrassingly heartfelt song lyrics and such as "Pig's Feet." The repository of cherished, handpicked images I had spent my life collecting and observing had its name changed to "~~Carnal Graveyard~~."

After a month, the renaming binge had spread across my entire PC. Even the file names of all the demo data for the tracks I was building had been overwritten with rather more sensitive titles. The sort of titles that, if I built an album out of them, might kick off a completely new genre.

I won't bother going into the throat-burning tirades that followed each incident. None of them had any notable effect on her.

"Hey…You changed my log-in and password, didn't you?"

Here we go again. My log-in for the video site was refusing to work this morning. I didn't remember changing the password. Which, nine times out of ten, meant it was her work.

"Oooh! Well done, master! I'm so happy you spotted it so quickly!"

"Change it back. Now."

"Oh, don't get in such a lather! Look what I've got for you!"

The "No" button silently selected itself in the "Save changes?" window. Every single window on the display closed (not minimized, *closed*) in an instant.

"Aaaahhhhh!!!"

Then, like the climax of some terrible '80s game show, a multiple-choice quiz came up on-screen.

"Right, question one! Get this correct, and I'll give you the first password to—"

"Are you crazy?! I'm gonna kill you! Gimme my song! Give it back!!"

Anyone watching from afar as I shot out of my chair and yelled hysterically at the display probably would have found it hilarious. She herself looked put off, wearing a kind of "whoa, who's *this* guy, this ain't good" kind of expression. Even though it was *her damn fault*.

"Ugggghhhhh…"

I had lost the strength to go on. I cradled my head in my hands, preparing to bang it against the desk in agony, when I felt something ominous around my elbow.

"Ahh! Master, master! Your drink!"

"Huh?"

The soda I was in the middle of drinking was pouring itself out over my keyboard and mouse.

A second scream thundered across my room as I, in a panic, beat the keyboard senseless with my ever-handy tissues.

I feared the worst, visions of my hardware getting drenched in high-fructose corn syrup dancing in my head.

But I couldn't allow myself to entertain thoughts like that. Body and soul, I had to focus or rescuing this endangered, vulnerable life. C'mon, *live!*

Everything I could wipe was wiped. Hurriedly, I tested out the keys. The only ones that responded were *o, r*, and *t*.

Apparently I was too late. Tears of frustrated resignation ran down my cheeks.

"Master! Mouse, mouse!"

Her voice snapped me back to reality.

Yes! She's right! I still had another life to save!

Holding back the tears, I took the mouse in hand.

"Please…! Please, come back to me…!"

I found myself gurgling out loud as I single-mindedly buried the mouse in a flurry of tissues. I couldn't say how long I spent on the task, but when I was done, all that worked was the right mouse button. The context menu popped on-screen, cruelly, hatefully.

Why does this world have to be so heartless?

What did these poor wretches *do* to anyone? It was just too horrible to contemplate.

"Oh! Hey, master, you can still type 'rot' all right! That's one word, at least!"

"Just…Just shut up. Please…"

I was possessed by a sudden urge to trash the entire computer setup. But doing that would kill me. Nobody else. Covering my face with my hands, I stood strong against the crashing torrents of hopelessness, bottling up my rage, as there was nowhere else for it to go.

For a while, there was silence. The whir of the AC unit filled the room, the air flowing in near my feet before gradually wafting upward and cooling my head. This is it. The absolute worst thing that could happen. With all of her past pranks, I reacted with abject fury, deleting her time, and time, and time again. But she must have had some backup of herself on the net, because as long as I was online, she would resurrect herself, reoccupying my screen the moment after her deletion like nothing had happened. But, you ask, wouldn't staying offline solve the problem? Perhaps. But I couldn't bear the thought of living in that particular hell for even a few hours. So, each time, the cycle began anew.

Truly, she was an enemy of mankind, one created by human hands. Ene, the enemy. I don't know who it was, but whoever instilled this hypercharged AI with that insane personality must have been some kind of sociopath.

I sighed. We had gone through this chain of wanton destruction multiple times by this point. But today there was just too much happening at once. Her myopic bouts of sadism would have driven anyone weaker than me to insanity by now. If you asked me, I think I've held out pretty well.

I wouldn't have minded getting a little appreciation for it, in fact. But no. I'm alone. An unemployed shut-in. Worthless.

It was hard to say how many minutes had passed as all of these desperate thoughts flashed through my mind. I suddenly noticed an eerie sense of quiet around me. I told her to shut up, yes, but it was rare for her to actually listen to me for so long. I turned an eye toward the display, only to find a

shocking sight beaming back at me.

The screen displayed a list of estimated delivery dates from assorted online electronics sites. This wasn't the surprising thing. *She* was, moping apologetically on-screen, trying to gauge my reaction.

Our eyes met. "Oh, uh…" she said, averting her gaze as she pointed out the keyboard and mouse I had all but set up a wake for. "I just…I dunno. I wasn't expecting this to happen. It was just kind of a joke, you know…"

I was stupefied. Where the hell did *that* come from…? Then I realized why she was trying to fish a response from me.

"You…you're not actually sorry, are you?"

"I…!"

She seemed to come to attention, but quickly turned back downward.

As I saw her shyly swing her legs back and forth, I began to feel how I did the first few days after we met. I found myself looking aside as well, a strange nervous energy dominating my mind. I, uh… Ugh. I had to *say* something—!

"Well, there's no point crying over spilled milk…I guess…Plus, they were both pretty old. I was kind of thinking about replacing them anyway…uh…"

That was about all I had. I looked back at the display. Her back was turned to me as she furiously flipped through all the shopping sites she could find.

"Yes! Exactly what I thought! I was just thinking it was time for a big upgrade! I mean, I'm shocked they lasted as long as they did! Talk about durable!"

I was speechless.

I don't think I've ever experienced such a strange, nonsensical feeling before.

There was no more anger, no more sadness; instead, my heart was filled with sheer emptiness.

"Hmm? Oh. Huh. That's rough."

My body was still savoring the profound void in my chest when her words stopped me.

"Rough? What's the problem? Just look for anyplace with same-day delivery. As long as it's usable, I don't care."

"Well, about that…I know this is kind of my fault too, but…"

"Kind of *all* your fault."

"I know you'll probably die unless you get this stuff today or tomorrow…"

"Pretty much."

"Yeah, see? So I'm looking around and all…but do you know what day this is, master?"

"Hmm? The fourteenth, isn't it? Probably…? Ahh!"

Startled, I scanned the search results opened full-screen on the display.

Every one of them read "Same-day delivery unavailable."

"It's the Obon holiday. Every business in Japan is closed for the Obon break. Most of them can't even ship out until the day after tomorrow."

I could feel myself growing dizzy.

"The day after tomorrow…? Two whole days…?"

I slumped deep into my desk chair.

Two days. To normal people, that's nothing.

But to me, this was a matter of life and death.

If you asked me to go on a hunger strike, I could probably handle that for two days.

If you asked me to go without sleep, I could probably stay awake for two days.

But *this* is different.

This is like oxygen to me. It's literally telling me to stop breathing.

Can *you* hold your breath for two days? Of course you can't.

After two years of this lifestyle, that was how much, how *badly* I had to fuse myself, heart and soul, with the Internet. I had a cell phone, yes, but for whatever reason, we never got any bars inside the house. In fact, I used it so rarely that I wasn't entirely sure if it worked any longer.

The computer itself wasn't broken, which was great, but as long as its control interface was completely dead, that metal box was as good as useless. If, for example, this girl sitting in my display were a little more understanding, it wouldn't be that devastating an issue. I could give her voice commands, she could handle them for me, we could somehow work it out.

But if I had to deal with her for two whole days, I'd probably get a bleeding ulcer from the stress or whatever. I'd be dead within twenty-four hours.

I had kept myself free of a horrible bloody death up until now by sticking to a strict "ignore her" policy whenever she spoke to me. And now you want me to give her *requests*? If I suggested that to her, she'd no doubt eagerly agree, eyes shining bright, like a kid with a new toy.

Even now she was staring at me intently. I could almost hear her voice already. "Well? Not much choice left, is there? *Is* there? Come onnnnnn…!"

I had only two options.

Give up the computer and die, or become her toy and die.

"Ugh, they both suck…"

The sense of hopelessness was strong enough to take word form as a sigh escaped my lips.

It honestly sounded stupid when I thought about it, but I was quite confident that if I ever went offline, I really would die. No exaggeration. Seeing myself faced with this ridiculous situation, with death the only feasible method of escape, made me want to cry.

"Ummm…"

"What?"

"Well…I imagine you have your own feelings about this, but I think I probably went just a little too far this time—"

She had already started her mopey little show again, nervously swinging her legs—the same angle that had already tricked me once before.

"Ugh. Is that the only variation in your 'apology' routine, or what? I'm not falling for that crap twice!"

"N-no! No! I mean it, so just give me a second! I'm really sorry, okay? Three days, four days, no matter how long it takes! I can serve as your eyes and ears!"

Her zoomed-in face loomed on-screen as she made her enigmatic plea.

"Huh?"

"So, until your stuff comes in the mail, you can feel free to use me as your keyboard and stuff! I won't mess around or anything! I'll do exactly what you tell me to do. I mean it!"

She went even more extreme with the close-up, her eyes welling up a little.

Damn…! I didn't know she had *that* variation, too!

That was all it took to get an eighteen-year-old virgin's heart racing. I was helpless.

Hang on, though. I'm not about to fold that easily. Or maybe I was. I was having trouble thinking straight. She *did* search the shopping sites for me, and she really seems to be…sorry? Is that the right word?

As I contemplated this, I spotted some text on the screen behind her.

Hang on…?

On the bottom left of the screen, behind her massive zoomed-in face, if you squinted, you could see the question on the multiple-choice quiz app from earlier being rewritten.

[Question 1:

Answer this, master, and you can input one character of your search term!

But be careful, because if you get it wrong, I'll start posting "cherished images" from your secret repository one by one to—]

"…No."

She tilted her head quizzically, her eyes still welling up with tears, as cute as she could muster.

But the days of her eliciting emotions, of any kind, from me were over.

"Behind you."

"Mm…? Gah!"

Turning around in a whirl, she closed the app, then peered back with her welled-up eyes, as if nothing were amiss. She was a bit shaken, having trouble perpetuating the act, but her tears were welling up to a higher point than ever, as if to make up the difference.

"Ergh."

"Um…?"

"…Quit it."

"Quit what?"

Two years. Looking back on everything that's transpired did make me emotional in some ways, but I knew that I had only one option left to survive.

I stood up and opened the closet door. I never even so much as took a walk around the block, so normally I rotated between only a few articles of clothing. The idea of a full-on clothes dresser seemed silly to me.

But today, and today alone, I'm going to open this up.

"M-master?!"

The voice behind me was filled with shocked surprise at this unbelievable turn of events.

I opened the first drawer, revealing a well-folded hoodie and Windbreaker.

Memories, long tucked away, from the era when I still wore this stuff regularly, flowed in a heavy stream.

"Oof…"

Recalling a variety of incidents from my past, I could feel the aches from old wounds come pounding back to the forefront. I shook the cobwebs from my head, took the tracksuit jacket folded up top on the far right, and closed the drawer.

The second drawer contained a lovingly arranged selection of cargo pants and shorts. I selected a set of khaki pants and briskly pushed the knob back in.

"Master! Master, what's happening to you?!"

Removing the sweatpants I had on, I started putting on my outfit. As I did, my mind began to feel distressed, as if faced with some sudden, insurmountable crisis.

"I've never seen you wear anything like *that* before! What are you doing…?"

"…Shopping."

"…Huh?"

"I'm going out shopping! Something wrong with that?!"

"Sh-shopping…?"

This was apparently not the reply she expected.

Well, what the hell did she *think* I'd be doing?

"Yeah. Shopping. I'm not gonna rely on you, so I'm gonna go buy it all myself."

"Shopping…! Boy, what a relief that is! I thought you were going to commit suicide or something for a moment!"

"I'm not committing suicide! What kind of freak kills himself because he spilled a drink on his keyboard?"

"You, master."

"…Yeah, but…"

It wasn't outside the realm of impossibility. I hated to admit it, but I could understand the impulse.

Amid this mindless chatter, I continued to dress myself.

"…I guess this'll do."

With the Windbreaker zipped up to the very top, my wardrobe was complete.

These clothes all felt a little stiff. I hadn't worn them in a while. I felt oddly nervous, as if wearing them for the first time.

"Heyyy! That actually looks pretty good on you! Like, normally you're a hopeless case, but…"

"Oh? You think so? I hope this is okay."

"Totally okay! A real man's man!"

"Yeah? You're gonna make me blush."

It *was* embarrassing, but I felt more than a little satisfied with myself as I turned toward the display. There, I saw a window filled with images of perfect-looking male models in an array of top-shelf fashions. Behind this display, I could hear her voice. "You look so, *so* cool! I always knew you

had some fashion sense in you!"

"Come on…You're gonna make me lose my nerve."

"Hmm? What do you mean?"

"Forget it. I know I look okay, all right?"

I was quickly losing any nerve I might have had to go outside. But there was no turning back now.

I took down the bag hanging in the closet and slung it around my head.

I was set, more or less. Now for the accessories.

"Uh, I need my wallet, and…and that's kind of it, huh?"

I plucked the wallet, which normally saw use only when shopping online, from near the pillows on my bed.

"That should do it. Whew…Well, I'm off."

I took a deep breath, then approached the bedroom door.

"H-hang on a minute, master!!"

Just when my hand was on the knob, her voice made me turn back toward the computer.

"What? Haven't you done enough for one day? Seriously."

"I know, I just…um, this is your first time out in a while, right? I just figured…you know, maybe two would be better than one, so…"

"Two? You think I got someone I can invite over?"

Thanks to my unflagging dedication to my craft over the past two years, I didn't have a single friend I could make contact with. Even if I did, I wasn't about to invite anyone along.

"I didn't mean that, master. I mean…Well, if I were with you, I could help navigate and stuff, so…"

She was plainly waiting for me to get the picture. I wasn't dense enough to miss the "take me along" message, but did she want me to lug the computer with me?

"How're *you* gonna come along? If you want to join me, you're gonna have to jump out of there first."

"Wha? You mean it?! Okay, I'm coming out! One, two…!"

Smiling, she pointed at a small chest of drawers next to the bed.

Atop it sat my touchscreen cell phone, covered in dust.

*

The height of summer. "Height" was the only way you could put it. I had no clue summer was even supposed to get this hot.

My body, generously blessed with the glory of air-conditioning until just a moment ago, was all but making breakfast-griddle sizzling sounds as the sweat poured off me.

All of this in the space of just twenty seconds. I had begun my journey at a confident saunter, but I could feel my hit points quickly being drained.

"Uhh, testing, testing. Can you hear me, master? Check one, two…"

"…How about we go back home…?"

"What? What was that? Hey, can you bring me a little closer when you talk, please?"

"Uh…never mind."

The owner of that nagging voice probably didn't know how to feel heat. I couldn't have been more jealous.

With my ear-canal earphones on as I gripped my phone like some kind of walkie-talkie, I must have looked like an agent on some kind of mission.

She had all but forced me to bring her along in the end, threatening to play that siren sound from the morning again or go on my high school's online forum and place a personal ad using my real name.

She was beaming as she strolled around my phone's standby screen. Somehow I doubted she would be accepting any calls that showed up.

I never imagined that software would be operating *me* one day, not the other way around.

Although the "operator" in question is really more of a modern-day plague-spirit.

Out on the street, I was faced with the full brunt of summer's brutal barrage.

Haze was shimmering off the far end of the road.

I felt like an arctic (or antarctic, for that matter) creature suddenly thrown into the savanna.

It was hot. Temperature, humidity; the exact statistics mattered little. It was just *hot*.

"You have to be kidding me…*This* is what summer's like?"

"Weren't you listening to me earlier? People were going to the hospital for heat stroke!…Oh, did you bring your insurance card, master?"

"Sure did. All set for the ambulance. Eesh."

Before I left, I had brought along a few things to ensure I was ready for anything that happened.

If worse came to worst and I collapsed in a pile of molten goo, at least they'd know who I am. Or was.

"Perfect! Nothing to worry about, then! Let's get truckin'!"

"Yeah…Wait, no! Why are *you* bossing me around?! This is all your fault I'm here in the—"

"Oh! Hey, go right at this stoplight! Right!"

"Huh? This street? Sorry…Man, I don't remember these roads at all. I don't even know where am any longer."

"Well, you never go outside, master. It's been two years since you left the house, right? It looks like the local map's changed completely since then."

The crushing heat prevented me from noticing, but things really *had* changed a lot.

I could see a new and unfamiliar midrise building in front of me, there were a couple of new condos here and there, and what few memories of the area that remained were quickly being overwritten in my mind. Must've been some of that urban development they're talking about. I've lived in this town for a while now, but I don't remember it changing *this* quickly in just two years. That, or maybe shutting myself in my room made the gap seem that much more gaping when I finally tiptoed out.

I was seized by the feeling that someone, somewhere, was gradually replacing my city, piece by piece.

Maybe everyone who lives here, including me, just didn't notice until now.

I mulled the idea as I turned back and made a right at the intersection, finding myself on a larger

street. My home was in a surprisingly handy location. There was a variety of transportation options, and the streets saw a decent amount of foot traffic. Watching the people crossing from left to right, right to left between the two buildings that flanked the street ahead didn't seem different at all from the display I usually spent my time staring at.

"Okay, make a left onto the main street and keep following it. Then go right and…um, master?"

"Hmm? Oh. Yeah. Got it. So, which way next?"

"I *said*, go left onto the main street! Then make a right! You sure are spacing out on me, master… Oh no! You aren't having heat stroke, are you?!"

"No, nothing like that. It just feels kind of…weird. Is there really a department store in that area?"

There definitely wasn't one two years ago. Not a big one, at least. It used to take kind of a field trip to find any electronics nearby.

"No doubt about it. See? Here's what it says on the website: "Your hometown department store! From home appliances and electronics to our vast array of kitchen accessories, we've got everything you need!"…Ooh, but they only built it this spring, I guess."

"Oh…No wonder I didn't know. But why here, though…?"

"Well, it looks like they've been pretty aggressively developing this neighborhood lately. If you go right here a little ways, there's this huge hospital, and then a new school after that. A big library, too, across the street. That all got built up from the end of last year to this one."

"All of that?! Man, this place has really changed…Anyway, here's the main street."

Leaving the side street, I was greeted with a panoramic view of my town.

Billboards and trees lining the road. Office buildings and restaurants.

Students in uniforms. Company staffers apologizing into their phones.

That, and all the noise, noise, noise they were making.

I felt something akin to light-headedness at all the emotions it conjured up at once.

"Whoa…I think I gotta bail. Wanna go home? Yeah, let's go home."

"Sure are a lot of people, huh? That's the Obon holiday for you, I suppose. Better hang in there!"

"You're not even listening to me, are you…? Oh, man, look at all these *people*…"

The shade from the trees that dotted the sidewalk, wider and better put together than the one on the side road, made walking a bit less of a chore, at least.

But all the people on the road and cars passing from one end to the other were making the heat index skyrocket for me.

I pressed on down the road, muttering into my phone, before reaching a massive intersection.

"If you go back home, master, you know you'll just be like 'oooh, I'm gonna die, I'm gonna die.' Tough it out a little longer!"

"Look, can you…ugh. I can't do it. Talking to you just makes me more tired. Oh, it's green. Better cross…"

After crossing the intersection, I could see a park a small distance ahead. It was filled with playground equipment—swings, a jungle gym, a fountain, and lots of other stuff a kid would kill to play on. Moving ahead, I could see just a bit of classic big-department-store signage on top of the right-hand building, previously hidden by the sidewalk trees and such.

"Whoa. It's even bigger than I thought. I had no idea this was here…"

"It's the largest department store in the neighborhood, apparently! Why don't you take a look through the clothing section while you're at it?"

"What're you, nuts? I told you, I'm going out today and today only. I'm sick of all this damn heat already."

"Yep! Called it! I knew that's what you'd say! If you'd told me you were going out to buy clothes, it would've been time to dial 911!"

"What am I, a caveman? I can buy clothes, dumbass!"

"Oh? So go browse a little."

"W-well, maybe not today…but…"

Before I could finish, I heard an ominous "keh-heh-heh" from my phone.

I could already feel my face turning red as I put it back in my pocket.

"Agh! Master, I was joking! We can do it next time! Okay?"

The phone stayed firmly inside my pocket.

"Yeah," I whispered to no one in particular. "Next time."

I doubt she could have heard my voice.

Making my way toward the advertising signage, I stumbled into another four-lane intersection.

The line of buildings on the right came to an end, revealing the full department store across the street.

…The scope of it could be described only as gigantic.

The jam-packed parking lot was large enough to make an untold number of tennis courts out of. Cars constantly circulated in and out.

Beyond the multihued traffic, the department store was made up of two buildings, both around ten floors tall, with arched walkways connecting them every few floors.

"Wow. What a sight. You can build something like this in two years or so…?"

"Oh! You there already? Master? Hellooooooo?"

"I just crossed the intersection. Not yet."

"Lemme see, too! Come onnnnn, master!"

"Ugh, all right, all right! Shut up!"

Having enough of being ranted at on full blast, I nimbly took the phone out of my pocket and pointed the rear camera at the store. An impartial onlooker would probably guess I was taking a souvenir photo.

"Wowwwww…! That's amazing! It's like some kind of castle!"

"You know, that's not a bad way of putting it. Especially when it's done up all like this."

"Huh…Oh! Hey, I think there's an amusement park or something on the roof! Let's go look!"

She used the phone's vibrate function to express her unbridled glee. Just as high intensity as always. More so, in fact.

"No, how 'bout we *not* go look?! It's not like you could try anything up there anyway."

"Laaaame."

The phone erupted with a couple of short bursts of vibration, followed by the new-text-message jingle.

I knew it was her doing, of course. It wasn't like there was anyone who would've actually been texting me.

"Mmm? What?"

I looked at the screen, only to find her staring back at me, a peeved expression on her face.

Her aggressive, furrowed gaze was enough to genuinely startle me.

"You could at least *try* to be a little more considerate, master! There's all *kinds* of places I want to go!"

"Yeah, that's great. You know you can't go on any of the rides, right? What's so fun about that? It'd be *boring*."

"…Ugh! All right! Forget it! Just go on your dumb little shopping trip! Go ride the merry-go-round by yourself for all I care!"

"You're not catching me dead on that, okay?!"

She flashed a look at me, and with that, the power shut off…Or not. The clock in the background was still on. Energy-save mode, maybe? Either way, the screen was totally black.

"Huh? Oh, come on. Hello?"

I pushed some buttons and shook the phone around a bit. Nothing. Slowly, inexorably, the clock continued its advance.

It was currently just past twelve thirty.

"What're you acting like this for? I really don't get why—Ow!"

Someone bumped into me. I had it coming, maybe. I was stopped just after the intersection, nearby the entrance to the store grounds.

"Oh, uh, sorry about—"

I turned upward, involuntarily looking into those *eyes*…and for a moment, time froze.

Even though it was midsummer, he was wearing a long-sleeved, light purple coat. His eyes were only just visible from deep within the drawn hood, but they were cold as ice, the eyes of some dead, inorganic beast.

I was seized in fright, as if looking at some forbidden bauble, and I felt the sweat jetting out of every pore in my body.

"Uh…umm…So, uh, I'm sorry for—"

I bowed my head down, making my self-diagnosed social anxiety disorder plain to the world with my stilted apology. This is it. He's going to kill me. Thanks for everything, Mom. Wish I could've gotten a girlfriend, at least.

"…Oh, no biggie. Sorry about that."

"Huh…?"

The moment I looked back up, not a trace of him could be found.

The front entrance was crowded, but not crowded enough for someone to disappear in a flash like that. There was nothing immediately nearby that he could have concealed himself behind. Not that quickly.

I braced my arms against my knees, my body ready to collapse on the spot. My heart pulsed loudly in my ears, and the sweat oozed out on cue. This wasn't just because it was the first time I interacted with another human being in ages. Those were absolutely the coldest eyes I had ever encountered in

my entire life.

And not because he was angry I bumped into him, either. They were deeper than that. They emitted a sense of intense calmness, a calm beyond anything I could imagine.

"…right?"

"…Huh?"

"I said, are you all right?"

Taking out my phone, I looked at the screen to find her perched in the center, apparently back in business but just as pouty as before.

"Oh…You're still there? I had hoped you finally left me alone to…uh."

Somewhere around the moment I was about to finish the sentence, her face began to glow bright red. Was this bad? Yeah, this was *bad*. I had never seen her truly in a rage before, but either way, this definitely wasn't her cheerful side.

"No! Uh, sorry! I'm just joking! I'm sorry, okay? Hey, let's go to the roof later! Up to that amusement park! Okay?"

In an instant, the red that had stormed across her face disappeared, and her eyes shined so brightly that I could almost hear the sparkly sound effects.

Great. I was scrambling for words, I know, but that was one button I absolutely should *not* have pushed.

"The amusement park?! Really? You just said we're going?!"

The phone practically vibrated itself out of my grip. The sparklies I heard in my mind were starting to get out of hand.

"Uh…? Um…S-sure, yeah! Great! It'll be a nice change of pace!"

"That's a promise, right?! Ummm…Oh! Hey, let's go on that thing that goes up and down and stuff! And after that…ooh, after that…!"

Part of me felt a twinge of regret at the reaction I was getting, but I figured it was harmless enough.

I had already begun to file away my earlier encounter as nothing to concern myself about.

This was more interesting anyway. The outside world was just as much a wondrous surprise for her as it was for me.

She can't smell the city or feel the heat steaming out from it, and maybe it's made her far more enraptured with this world than I am, or ever will be.

I went through the entryway, nodding in vague agreement to all her giggling requests for tour stops as I proceeded in.

The design on the paved stone path leading in from the entrance must have cost a staggering amount of cash. It was hopelessly, thoroughly ornate, a mesh of rectangular stones in a dazzling variety of colors.

No doubt it was meant to symbolize some grand, murky spiritual something-or-other mere plebeians like me could never hope to understand.

Tromping across this inscrutable creation of a no doubt lofty-minded artistic genius, I reached the building that loomed on the left side of the path.

From directly underneath, it seemed impossibly high, giving the illusion of extending all the way into the cosmos.

An information map, again done up in gilded, ornate fashion, stood in front of the enormous glass door.

It was encased in an exquisite frame, one that would be right at home surrounding some great cultural masterpiece.

"Electronics, electronics…Oh, seventh floor."

"Once we're done on that up-'n'-down thing, I want to go on the roller coaster, okay? We can save the Ferris wheel for later, so…"

"All *right*! I hear you! We're going!"

She kept repeating her itinerary like some magical incantation, to the point where I could imagine "up-'n'-down thing" and "roller coaster" leapfrogging each other in my mind, one springing along after the other for eternity.

"Great! So let's get the shopping over with! Mouse! Keyboard!"

"I need something to drink first…"

The door automatically opened as I stood in front of it. In an instant, frigid air greeted me with its blessed presence.

"Hnnaahhhhh…"

The pleasant rush was enough to make me audibly moan.

"You make it sound so dirty, master!"

"*That's* the first thing you have to say to your master after he's come so far?"

Oh, crap.

I had yelled out loud at her. A family of customers browsing around a display of summer gear stared right at me. The youngest boy pointed toward me, laughing innocently.

"Um…uh. Yeah. Ha-ha-ha."

I was sure they saw me as some kind of demented invalid. Putting on a less-than-believable smile, I let the boy watch me as I hurried myself toward the elevators and out of sight.

Don't end up like me, kid.

The elevators were in a room detached a small distance from the shopping space, one that featured a bench and some vending machines lined up on the wall. An elderly man was sitting there, next to a woman with a baby in her arms.

"Oooooh, vending machines…!"

It had finally come. The moment when I would get the beverage I had thus far denied myself for some reason, waiting until I'd arrived at this exact place.

My throat was so dry, I was afraid my esophageal walls would glue themselves together with every breath I took.

I took a thousand-yen bill out of my wallet—I'm a high roller, I know—and fed it to the drinks machine.

That carbonated beverage was *all mine*.

The thought of the liquefied sugar osmosing into every cell of my body filled my heart with

childlike excitement.

The moment the button lit up, I jammed my thumb into it. There was just 0.3 seconds' worth of difference. I've got supernatural reflexes when I need 'em.

The sound of the thudding soda can filled my ears with its blunt melody. That thud was surely one of the joys of the vending-machine experience. I was almost moved to tears by the *clunk* sound I'd gone so long without hearing.

The can I eventually plucked out was blistering cold to the touch, like something from another world. It was sheer bliss, and my only regret was that this wondrous delight could only be savored by the palm of my hand. I was seized by the impulse to run this can across every inch of my drenched body, but that really *would* make me a pervert.

Enough of that. The time had finally come. I pulled the tab and opened the can. The*psshh* sound serenaded my ears anew, the aroma of the carbonated beverage ruthlessly, thoroughly caressing my nostrils. Without a moment's hesitation, I brought it to my lips and poured it down my throat. Then I let it soak in…No. That hardly begins to explain the feeling. I let it *fill* me, in every way possible.

"You should stop panting like that, master. It's gross."

"Gnnhh. Ahhh…"

"Now it's beyond gross."

"Shut *up*! If you could drink this, you'd do the exact same thing!"

"I would not. By the way, master, the elevator's waiting!"

Out of the four elevators that lined the wall, the one on the far left was open, people quickly streaming out of it. Once emptied, it briskly began to fill with impatient customers.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah, I'll take the next one. Once I'm done drinking this."

With that, I slurped down the soda, enjoying the fragrant carbonation as its sugary payload infiltrated every cell of my—

"Ahhhh! It's closing! Hurry up and drink it!"

"We'll go on the next one, for chrissake! I'm busy!"

"Come onnnn…Hurry! What if it's closed when we get up there?!"

"They're not gonna close the damn amusement park in the middle of the day! That elevator's full anyway."

The remainder of the elevator line had already opted against joining the pack of sardines inside the car.

"Just hang tight for a sec. I'll get us on the next one."

Ignoring her as she put the phone on a low rumble, I examined the elevator a bit more closely.

The up and down buttons were the kind that lit up with just a light touch, the arrows done in a fancy font that revealed the interior designer's thoroughness. A short introduction to the store was written on a plaque next to the left-hand elevator.

"Huh…'The building's state-of-the-art, computer-controlled disaster-prevention technology provides the maximum level of safety possible in every corner of the store.' Neat."

"State-of-the-art, huh? They better erase the 'state-of-the-art' bit next year."

"Yeah. Nice attention to detail there. You never know; maybe they'll put some new state-of-the-art stuff in next year. Besides, they're just bragging, is all. All they're saying here is 'We got all this fancy junk on the outside, but the inside's full of high-tech crap, too,' you know?"

"Huh…Sounds like a pain to keep running."

"I'll bet. Oh, here it is."

The "1" light on the nearest elevator flashed, and just as before, the riders flowed through the open doors. Once everyone was spat out, the elevator was once again inundated with a steady stream of waiting shoppers.

From where I was located, I would have no difficulty getting on this time. Tossing the empty can into a nearby garbage bin, I followed the flow into the elevator.

The "7" button for electronics was already lit up in orange; some previous passenger must have pressed it. I appreciated the gesture, given that the crush of people was making the button panel difficult to reach. Once the elevator approached its maximum weight load, the doors silently slid shut and we began to go upward. The air-conditioning was on, but all these riders in a cramped space still made things sticky and uncomfortable. I wanted to get off as soon as possible, but we stopped at nearly every floor before the seventh, my body getting squeezed and kneaded at every stop before I finally reached my destination.

Finally, the door opened, and I filed out with a few other customers.

Compared to the summerwear, swimsuits, and food that spread across the first floor, it was a completely different world.

The entire space was surrounded by large panes of glass, filling the floor with bright sunlight.

The sense of fresh, inviting openness that filled it seemed strange for an electronics department. It exuded high-class stateliness, like an elite office building.

The first thing that caught my eye was the kitchen-goods department. It was lined with enormous refrigerators, all but daring customers to hang an entire pig's carcass from its roof, something I would never fit into my place in a million years. I noticed a line of metallic, weapon-like rice cookers, all of which seemed far too complex for simply cooking rice. Colorful signs shouted NEW INVENTORY! and HOT PRODUCT! in huge lettering. For someone like me with no interest whatsoever in this stuff, it all seemed totally alien.

A large aisle—it had to be fortyish meters in length—slashed its way across the entire floor. On the far end, I could see fancy-looking audio systems and the latest flat-screen TVs displayed on the wall.

"Whoa! This is huge! I bet this floor alone is bigger than most specialty electronics shops, huh?"

Not wishing to get screamed at any more than I had already, I pointed my phone's camera straight ahead as I hit the aisles. There was nothing but large appliances at the forefront, and judging by the length of the aisles and the size of the building, you could probably find almost anything electrical you wanted in here. There must have been ten or so employees milling around, all wearing vests with catchy sales slogans sewn on.

"Master! What's that? It looks like a bomb!"

"That…? What *is* that? Some kind of water heater? It looks like a huge hand grenade."

With its rough, rugged design and uniform dark-teal color, it must have been deliberately designed to resemble a weapon. If it weren't for the meter on the side showing the current water level, someone would have called the bomb squad by now.

"That is soooo cool! Hey, master, you mentioned you wanted some hot water earlier, didn't you?!"

"Yeah, but I just didn't feel like going downstairs to make some instant ramen, okay? I don't need that piece of junk in my room. That, and I'd still need to go downstairs to fill it up."

"Aww, why not? It'd make a great conversation piece when you get a visitor or—uh. I'm sorry. Said too much."

A pall descended between us. Her expression was solemn, as if she had accidentally brought up a friend's horrible incontinence problem at a dinner party.

"Let's just drop it."

"I apologize! I just wasn't thinking, so…I'll be more careful next time."

"Just drop it! Okay?!…But oh, hey, check this thing out! That design is nuts!"

I frantically tried changing the topic to the microwave ovens lined up next to us along the aisle. Not only were they perfectly normal, but they were also from a brand I'd never heard of. A sign reading INVENTORY CLEARANCEwas tacked to the wall, and they had all been discounted two-thirds off their list price.

"How 'bout it, huh? Nice and simple, but that's what makes it so avant-garde, right? What do you think? Huh?! Wanna take one home?!"

"Master, you need that even less than the last thing! That bomb was a lot cooler than this!…Oh, also, what did you come here to buy in the first place?!"

"Oh. Yeah, the mouse. Let's get it and go home."

"…Master?"

Two quick jolts of vibration signaled her suddenly serious tone.

"No! Yeah, I know! The amusement park! I didn't forget, all right? Uh, where's the computer stuff…?"

I peeked at the signs hanging from the ceiling, pointing out all the assorted electronics available. They were a little too specific to help me find what I wanted.

"Computer goods, compu—Oof!"

I was so busy staring upward as I wandered around that I bumped right into a sales employee. It had been a very bump-into-guys kind of day. I wasn't much of a fan.

"Excuse me! Uh…Could, could you tell me where the computer equipment is?"

I removed an earbud as I spoke, trying my best to sound apologetic to the employee while I did. Once I had a good look at her face, I realized that she was…well, pretty beautiful. She*had* to have a boyfriend. The sheer femininity she exuded told me that much.

"Umm…?" the employee said, confused for a moment. "Oh! Right! Computers! Just go straight down this aisle, then go right down the second-to-last aisle before the wall."

"Oh. Uh…uh, th-thank you…"

My first decent conversation with another human being since time immemorial made me nervous, but the relief at pulling it off—and with such a pretty woman, too!—filled me with satisfied smugness. Yes. I *like* this store. I could feel my feet growing lighter as I traipsed down the aisle she pointed out.

"Umm, master?"

"Hmm? What's up?"

My response sounded even more upbeat than I intended. Does talking to a woman really change a person this much? I felt like I had uncovered one of the great secrets of life.

"About this…"

Suddenly, I heard a stream of ambient noise broadcast into my ear.

"Huh? What're you…"

Just as I was about to ask, I heard the murmur of background noise hiss in my headphones. Then—

"Ahhh…ex-cuuuuse me…?…Uh. Uhhh…C-c-could you tell me…Where…where the computer equipment…?…Is?" said the creepily hushed voice of a young man.

This was followed by a plainly confused (though still clear and refreshing) *"Umm…"* from a young woman.

Then the recording ended.

"That was how it sounded, master. No wonder it took her a second to understand you."

The results of spending the past year engaging in mumbly conversations with a mysterious computer AI were now crystal clear.

I felt like someone had driven a cold, stonelike object into my stomach. I had to resist the impulse to scream at the top of my lungs.

"I'm pretty much used to it by now, you know, but for normal people, that's gonna be pretty tough to decipher."

"Let's…let's just go home."

"No, master! We haven't gone to the amusement park yet!"

"Oh, who cares anymore…? This whole thing's been like a roller coaster to me anyway."

I was afraid the tears would fall out if I looked down, so I kept walking with my head tilted upward. I was never coming back here again.

"Oh, don't worry about it so much! If you want to talk, you know, I'm always happy to listen!"

"Great, 'cause once we get home, I'm gonna need some counseling. I want to die…"

"Hee-hee-hee! You got it! So just hang in there for now, all right, master? Look! We're almost at the computer section, aren't we?"

To my right, I was greeted with an array of Internet-ready headsets and cameras. They probably set up this display to cash in on the big video-streaming craze. It was so stupid. Why can't we as a species all just stop talking to each other?

The aisle beyond was radiant with superthin notebook PCs and high-spec computers for online gaming, the sort of machines that would normally make me squeal with delight.

But now, I just wanted to get my mouse and stuff, get on the up-'n'-down thing, get on the roller coaster, and get home.

"I gotta get back home…"

"Master?!"

"All right, all right…ugh…"

I plodded on, toward the mice display, signs on both sides inviting me to GET ON THE NET QUICKLY AND EASILY! and CONNECT YOUR PHONE TO YOUR PC FOR VIDEO CHAT and so on. It was honestly just tiring to look at.

Working my way through the gaudy showroom, I finally reached the mouse and keyboard section.

It was packed with all the latest gadgets. Wireless, trackballs, you name it.

"Sure are a lot of 'em. Guess it doesn't really matter what I get, but I might as well go for a durable model—"

—It was so sudden.

With no advance warning, a loud boom echoed across the entire floor, even blaring through my earbuds.

It was a muffled, otherworldly kind of sound, but one I had heard before.

On cue, I heard screams all around me.

In an instant, my heart was racing.

I impulsively ripped an earbud out. It added a vital sense of realism to the shouting and the chaos that ruled showroom-wide.

"What the hell's—?!"

I was in too narrow of an aisle to get the full picture. As I tried to reach the main aisle, the sound of something heavy and metallic thudding downward echoed across the floor once again.

I looked back toward the elevators, only to find the corridor I had just walked down blocked by a white metal wall.

It was as if the shutter was designed to cut the floor cleanly in half—the side with the elevators, and this side. I was completely sealed off, the shutter not touching a single merchandise shelf and not leaving a single exit.

Looking toward the shutter, at the far end of the now-blocked main aisle, I instantly realized what was making the noise. I could hardly believe it at first, but once I grasped the reality of it, the blood drained impossibly quickly from my face.

That thing must've caused the first blast, along with the screaming.

The female employee I had just asked directions from was lying there.

A red puddle was slowly expanding beneath her, from her healthy-looking thighs to the white tiled floor.

The twisted look of pain on her face contained not a trace of the cheerful smile that was once there.

A large man stood nearby. He wore a stubbly beard and the sort of sheer, body-hugging suit you see special-forces guys wear in the movies.

He had a pistol in his hand and grenades hanging from his hips—real ones, a far cry from the water heater earlier—and yet he acted strangely nonchalant, as if nothing was at all amiss.

Several other men were around him, all dressed alike. They encircled the stubble-bearded man, guns pointed at the shoppers stuck in each aisle. Mine was in their blind spot, and from it, I could hear the screams of the shoppers, along with the strident, shouted commands from the men keeping them at bay. The employees were apparently just as helpless as the customers. There were likely more men besides the ones I could see.

Everyone who heard the initial explosion and gunshot.

Everyone who actually saw it.

Everyone else who was running in a panic around the floor—all of us were corralled together at frightening speed.

It couldn't have taken more than a few minutes.

This group had the showroom floor completely under their control with astonishing speed.

"…That all of them?"

"Yes, sir. That's everyone on this side of the floor, including the shoppers."

"Good. Aww, I suppose all of you were busy enjoying a little shopping on your holiday or whatever. Well, too bad. Guess you're out of luck today, huh?"

The stubble-bearded man bombarded those of us beneath him with his crass, unsettling voice.

Several dozen of us were gathered into a corner of the TV department on the far side of the seventh floor. We had all been made to sit on the ground, our hands bound with some kind of superstrong adhesive tape.

The glass windows the sunlight had been seeping through just a moment ago were covered in white shutters, the kind the employees lower down after the store closes. A cacophony of patrol sirens faintly whined in the background, and we could hear the voices of what we assumed to be police negotiators on the other side of the giant floor-splitting shutter.

Nine men stood in front of us, all of them dressed like walking definitions of the word "terrorist." Three of them had their guns drawn upon us, three of them toward the shutter, and another two were close by the presumed leader, the stubble-bearded man, engaged in conversation.

"Thirteen hundred hours. It's time."

"Right."

At the signal of his partner, who had been keeping a close eye on his watch, the stubble-bearded man took out his cell phone. He began to talk, the picture of calmness, like he was ordering a pizza.

Suddenly, the voice emanated not from the man in front of us, but from the building's PA system at high volume.

"Uhh, test, test, test. Oh, can you hear me? Hello, officers. Another boring day on patrol, huh? I'm only gonna say this once, so pay attention."

The moment he began to speak, the negotiators across the shutter fell silent.

The man took a breath, the faraway sirens the only noise we could hear.

"As you probably noticed, we've taken over this floor. We've got several dozen hostages, and, ah, they're all right for now…for now. So let's make this quick. We have one demand. We want one billion yen within thirty minutes."

The man continued in his matter-of-fact tone, not giving notice to the reactions around him, as if he was simply asking for a side of cheese bread.

"The handover will take place half an hour from now, on the roof of this building. One of our men is already stationed up there. You will drop the money to him from a helicopter. Don't bother with counterfeit bills or tracking devices or anything; you'll be wasting your time. Also, and I'm sure you can guess this, but if I start hearing things like 'We need more time' or 'Release the hostages first,' we're going to immediately kill everybody here."

This caused an instant clamor from the captured customers, one that was just as quickly halted by

the barrels of the three men's guns. Several customers were quietly choking back their sobs.

"…Well, that about wraps it up. So try and act accordingly, all right? If you don't follow what I told you, no matter what it is…ah, I suppose you know. Catch you later."

After the man finished, his voice no more excited than if he were chatting with a friend, he sat down on a nearby bench, acting like this whole business was terribly annoying to him.

How many people ever become terrorist hostages in their lives? It can't be that high a percentage.

Now, how about people who get taken hostage after stepping out of their home for the first time in two years? Anyone besides me?

I was disgusted with my utter and complete lack of good fortune. If today wasn't the very definition of an unlucky day, then I didn't know what was.

"Ugh. We have got *nothing* to do right now. You think I shoulda made it fifteen minutes?"

The man had a leg on one knee, playing with his cell phone, not a care in the world. I thought that the ringleader of a gang about to commit the crime of the century would be…I don't know. Less lethargic?

"It's only a little longer now, sir," said one of his nearby cronies, trying his best to tactfully appease him.

They were already acting like they got away with the perfect crime…What were they planning to do after this? Do they have an escape helicopter coming? No way. They'd get tracked down and rounded up in one fell swoop. There had to be at least one more gang member, the guy who lowered the shutter and set up the PA announcement, besides the handover man on the roof. So much for that "state-of-the-art, maximum level of safety" crap. This is a *total* disaster! That fancy-schmancy system gave them exactly the tools they needed. If all the security equipment was controlled by computer, anyone who seized that computer could have this entire structure at their fingertips from the control room.

I had no idea how they did it, but judging by how calm they were, they must have been confident about their escape. They didn't make it *look* perfect, but everything had been handled perfectly so far. They had to have something planned.

—But I didn't feel like quietly waiting for it.

Will they release us? These men didn't look like they cared about human lives any more than a stray bug on their leg.

And now they had our lives in their hands.

A situation as unstable as this could fall apart at any moment.

A catalyst.

If there was just some kind of catalyst, we could flip this completely over.

"Ngh!"

Suddenly, the stubble-bearded man stood up, his face twisted in pain, holding the back of his head.

"Hey…!"

"Huh…? Grhhh!"

The man approached one of his cronies and punched him full in the stomach.

"Don't 'huh' me…Who the hell you think you're punching in the head? Huh?! C'mon, tell me!"

He launched a swift kick at the crony, still writhing on the floor.

Everyone nearby tensed up at this odd turn of events.

Not even the men guarding us could fully conceal their agitation.

"What the hell's going on…?" I whispered to myself.

"Heh-heh-heh…"

As the ringleader's angry voice boomed across the floor, the man sitting behind me to the left suddenly began to snicker.

"Huh…?"

Surprised, I turned to look at the man who erupted in this sudden, incredibly inappropriate laughter.

"Mm? Oh, uh, sorry. Like, it was just so funny, I couldn't help myself."

I supposed he was a little younger than me. His large, catlike eyes were situated underneath short, light brown hair, his frame covered by a gray sports jacket.

"Something funny to you…?"

"What? Oh, sure, this and that. You know, I can't help but notice you've got some very interesting-looking *eyes*. Lemme guess: You're thinking about doing something, but, like, you haven't spotted a good chance yet. Right?"

The shouting continued. Everyone, terrorist and hostage, was completely on edge, and yet this guy acted like he couldn't care less, as if this were a movie and he was watching it on TV.

"How do you…?"

Our hushed conversation was drowned out by all the terrorist ranting. The man with the catlike eyes continued.

"Oh, just a hunch. But how about it…? You have some kind of secret plan, maybe?"

"…Guys like these, if I could get my hands free, I could make their eyes bug out in half a minute."

"Yeah? Huh. Wow. You don't look like you're lying, either. So, like, what kind of chances are you giving yourself?"

"Um…not to brag…but 100 percent."

He began to snicker derisively again.

"You don't have to believe me. I doubt I can get this tape off anyway."

"No, no, sorry. It's not that I don't believe you; I just love that crazy confidence you have. Yeah. Neat."

He did not look like he believed me at all. In fact, he looked like this entire crisis was the greatest matinee show ever. But this wasn't a crazed man, driven into a mad panic by the ordeal. His words were strangely soothing.

"You know, I think if we wait a bit, that guy's probably gonna talk over the PA system again. You'd be, like, guaranteed to see a chance after that. And then…well, it'd be up to you, I guess. Good luck, okay?"

"Huh? What're you talking about? Don't you remember? I can't even get my hands—"

"God, this is pissing me off. Hey, get me on the mike again. I got something I want to say to these idiots."

"Y-yes, sir!"

Punching out his cronies, one by one, as they tried to plead their cases to him apparently failed to quell the stubble-bearded man's anger. The veins on his forehead bulged visibly as he ordered one of his men to get him back on the PA.

It couldn't have been more than ten minutes since the last announcement, and here we go again.

The cat-eyed man took in the scene, basking in every minute of it. Whether it was coincidence or not, he had predicted all of this. But will that give me a chance? And even if it did, unless I could get this tape off my hands, there was no way to take advantage of it.

After his minion reported back, the man took out his phone and began his second broadcast.

"Uh…You guys hear me? I'm taking ten minutes off the time limit. You now have ten minutes left. You start whining about how that's not enough, I'm killing half the hostages. Got that?"

Once more, the hostages began to shout and scream. The terrorists guarding them, so quick to silence the group earlier, seemed just as nervous and confused at this sudden change of plans.

"Also, I'm gonna say this now, but after we get the money, we're all leaving by helicopter. I'd advise against trying to track us. If we go down, the bomb we got in there's gonna take a nice chunk of the city out with us. If we notice even the slightest hint of any pursuit, we're gonna drop that sucker."

A commotion rose up among the police on the other side of the shutter. I couldn't blame them. They were taking the entire town hostage.

Whoever these men were, they were a tightly structured group, one with a scrupulously designed plan. They were willing to stake the lives of everyone in town to make their escape. And given how well armed they apparently were, no way the police alone could handle them. Not in this short a time.

"What is he *thinking*…?"

My house could very well be within their bomb range. If my mother or my little sister was back home right now, no way they could escape the blast.

"Damn…This has got to stop."

I could feel myself growing increasingly unable to contain my bubbling frustration.

The cat-eyed man spoke to me, as if he saw this coming.

"Stay cool. This'll be just a little bit longer, so stay cool."

I couldn't take his laid-back idiocy anymore.

"…Why are you so goddamn relaxed?! My family might die in a few minutes!"

I had screamed at the top of my lungs. The entire floor fell completely silent. Even the men guarding us looked bewildered for a moment.

The cat-eyed man made an "oh dear, *now* you've done it" face for a moment, but still didn't look particularly disturbed.

The stubble-bearded man turned his sharp gaze toward me. Then he started walking my way.

When he reached me, he stooped down and brought his face close to mine.

"Who the hell do you think *you* are?"

The moment he spoke, visions of all the man's previous violent behavior flashed across my eyes.

My body was filled with a kind of fear that was completely alien to me. I began to shiver convulsively.

"Hey, what're you shaking for? Where'd all that macho BS go, huh?"

Smirking, he took me by the hair and pulled me up.

"All skin and bones, aren't you…? I bet you don't even go outside at all. A wimpy little shut-in puss like you, nobody's gonna miss *you* when you're dead! Huh? Will they?!"

The man erupted in a burst of laughter, then turned to speak with his crew.

His loud voice literally rang in my mind.

…Good thing I only had to listen to him at full blast with one of my ears.

"…for life…"

"Huh? You say something? Speak up. I can't hear you."

I looked him in the eye as I tried to articulate as much as possible.

"I hope all you bastards get shut into a jail cell for life!"

"Ooh! Nice! That was a good one!"

The moment after my would-be critic stopped talking, a large television hanging just behind the man fell to the ground with a tremendous crash. It was so sudden that everyone instantly turned toward the sound.

After that, the oversized speakers beneath it began toppling over, one after the other, even though nothing had even touched them.

"Whoa! What the hell…?!"

The stubble-bearded man tossed me away like a rag and walked toward the mess, gun in hand.

"There somebody in—?!"

Before he could finish, the shelf adjacent to the man suddenly tipped over, the merchandise it was holding falling on him in an avalanche.

"Ngh! Whoa!"

Beyond the fallen shelf, I could see the computer department I'd been holed up in when this all began.

I had no idea why all of this was happening so suddenly, but this had to be my "chance."

A moment later, all the tension drained from my body.

“Off you go. Looking forward to it!”

I turned to the cat-eyed man next to me. He was waving a hand at me, smiling. Somehow we were both unbound.

My heart pulsed louder than ever before on that day.
Even louder than when the siren jarred me awake that morning.

I placed a hand on the floor and nimbly pushed myself up to my feet in a single motion.
The gun-toting terrorists were completely taken aback, unable to follow what was going on. I could commiserate. I didn’t really understand what I was doing, either.
—But I knew what I had to accomplish.

I jumped over to the mound of merchandise covering the stubble-bearded man, used him as a springboard to make sure he stayed there, and leaped for the computer display beyond.

The other men finally reacted, turning their guns toward me.
I could hear screaming and “Look out!” from the group of hostages.

But all these reactions were too late. The target of my mission was right in front of me.

Before my final leap, I gripped the phone I had taken out of my pocket and, for the first time in what seemed like ages, called for her.

"Ene…Do it!"

"Once I'm done, we're going to the amusement park, okay?!"

Through the earbud in my right ear, I heard the young girl's voice, perky as always.

I had taken the phone in the display demonstrating the computer-cell phone connector cable and replaced it with my own. In the blink of an eye, I could see a familiar form suddenly occupying every display in the room.

As I saw it unfold, my stomach was suddenly racked by a force I had never experienced before.

A force like someone driving a hammer into my torso.

Then, the world faded out of focus.

I crumpled to the ground, unable to cushion my fall. My unprotected face hit the white tiled floor.

I could feel all the strength rapidly drain from my entire body.

As my consciousness ebbed, I could hear all the shutters open up at once.

My body was bathed in warm sunlight.

It reminded me of sitting in my desk by the classroom window, napping. I swore I could hear a certain voice from the past talking to me.

*

…How long was I out? I woke to find myself lying in bed within a book-filled room. I looked over to find a sink and a towel. Someone must have been taking care of me. My mind was still hazy as I felt around my pocket, but my cell phone was nowhere to be found.

—Back there. When we were taken hostage.

Through the earbud that I had kept in my ear, Ene had never stopped talking to me.

To be honest, I think she was annoying me far more than that stubble-bearded guy.

Right after they rounded me up, she was functioning as a sort of off-kilter cheerleader, along the lines of "Ooooh, this isn't good. Better keep yourself cool, master! I know we can survive this!" But by the second half, when the stubble-bearded man was bearing down on me, she had transformed into a white-hot ball of rage: "Can we kill this guy, master? Can we?! We can, right?!"

The entire building was under computer control. As long as I could get Ene into the system, it didn't matter who occupied the control room. It was obvious that no hacker could have outwitted her.

But amid the hostages, unable to use the camera or talk to me directly, it was really a shock how she could figure out what was going on strictly by audio cues and occupy the whole system in

milliseconds. I always thought her head was a little buggy, but I guess she had it more together than I ever knew.

In a way, I suppose, I'm still alive right now thanks to Ene.

I was still a little foggy on the details, but I guess I should thank her…I never got to take her to the amusement park, either…

But if my phone isn't here, did I leave it in the store? I'm sure she could easily find her way back out, but…

For now, however, I had best take advantage of this time I suddenly seem to have all to myself.

Today I think I'll just sleep all day and—

"…Where the hell am I?!"

I shot up in bed and tried to gauge my surroundings.

"Ah…!"

I heard a clang, and then I saw her. A girl with long, white, fluffy hair. Was she my nurse or whatever here? Apparently startled by my sudden outburst, she had fallen out of her chair.

"Oh. Uh…um."

"Ah! I-I-I'm sorry!"

For some reason, she apologized to me. Then, for some other reason, she hid behind the chair.

Once my head cooled down and I had a grip of the situation, I noticed that my body was almost entirely pain-free.

I seemed to remember being shot in the stomach…

"Um…Could I ask who you—"

"Master, you're awake?!"

The moment I tried to speak to her, I heard an incredibly familiar voice. What was less familiar were the three figures that walked through the open door.

There I saw the cat-eyed man, the guy from the entrance with the purple coat—at the time I'd been sure he was a guy, but upon closer examination she was definitely female—and Momo, my younger sister, holding my cell phone.

"Oh, master! I'm so glad to see you in good shape! Now we can all go to the amusement park together!"

Ene, bubbly as always, called to me from the phone speaker.

"Huh…? Momo? And you? That guy from…*Huh*?"

"Ugh, you are so *stupid*, bro! I was so worried about you! And, Ene, you really can't expect us to hit the roller coaster after a day like that…"

Momo and Ene had apparently gotten acquainted with each other. They already sounded like good friends.

"Um…huh? I guess I wouldn't mind going, but…Well, first off, what am I—"

"See? See?! Oh, master, what a rough-and-tough movie hero you are! A real man always sticks to his word! Let's go! Right now! C'mon!"

"Hang on, what?" the cat-eyed man chimed in. "People are going to the amusement park? Like, count me in, too! Let's do it!"

"W-we're going out again…?"

The white-haired girl, still sitting on the floor, seemed startled by the concept.

"Uh…yeah. Sorry for all the commotion. Luckily that shot only grazed you, so we decided to bring you back here for now. Didn't want to attract too much attention to ourselves."

"W…what?"

The hooded woman seemed different from before. Especially those *eyes*.

"Master! We gotta hurry! The park's gonna close!"

There were too many conversations chaotically flying around at once. My brain was over capacity. I decided to stop thinking for a bit.

"Just…whatever."

No rest for the wicked, I suppose. Never should have expected any.

I was hoping they would let me be for just a little bit longer, but Ene's pleading high-pitched voice refused to allow me even that.

I think I probably let a vague kind of half smile cross my lips.

—The cacophony of cicadas buzzed beyond the window, just as loud today.

A long, long August 15th was just about to begin.

KAGEROU DAZE II

I had a terrible, hateful dream. A dream where you went away, right before my eyes.
I had it time, and time, and time again.
I had it yesterday. I saw everything.

How many times will I have seen it today?
How many times does yesterday make?

How many times have we talked to each other in this park?
It's the first time for you, maybe, but I lost count long ago.
I remember talking to you about this before.
Many times before.
And you always believed in me.
You were always so seriously concerned.

But every time, you always die in the end.
When I bring up this topic with you, you get worried for me. You get sad.
So I decided to stop talking about it any longer.

It's all right. Now, it's all right.
I've even started to like talking to you, here in the park.

Just listening to you speak is enough.
You've told me the same thing so many times, I've memorized every word.
But that's fine.
That's fine, so I just wanted you to keep talking.

Because when I hear your voice, I don't have to listen to the cicadas' noise.
Because I can focus on nothing but that voice.
I look at my watch. It was just about half past noon.

"Wanna head home?"

I extended a hand and you grabbed it, looking terribly embarrassed as you did.
So uncomfortable with me, right up to the end…
No wonder I was never popular.

Well, our time's just about up. Better get going.
Thanks for everything, Hibiya.

The noisy cicadas,
the haze shimmering across the road

…I hate everything about summer.

—As I looked up, the steel pole was just about to land on my face.

"Oh! Mornin', Momo! Lookin' cute as always today!"

"Hee-hee-hee! Yeah…"

After a quick greeting, we passed each other by. That was the thirty-seventh encounter today.

It was early morning as I walked through the nearly empty shopping center, far removed from the shortest, most direct route to school. Right now, there were no shops open, no customers milling about—or there shouldn't have been. But the place was quickly beginning to come alive.

A steady stream of people flew out of the stores I passed, as if waiting for just this moment to try to strike up a conversation.

"Ooh, Momo! Off to school again? Try to enjoy summer break at least a little, eh?"

"Uh…yeah. Thanks. Ha-ha…"

Number thirty-eight.

I gave an awkward greeting to the produce seller who popped out from behind his stand. Looking ahead, I noticed the road begin to swell up with people.

"Ngh…!"

I recoiled for a moment, but there was no time to sit and ponder over it. I made a right at the shuttered drugstore adjacent to the produce stand, attempting to escape down a narrow side path.

I checked my watch as I began to trot along.

If anything, I had it pretty lucky this morning.

Usually, I'd screw up and have to retreat back in the direction of home by now.

If everything went right, I might actually make it through the school gate with time to spare today.

As I made a left at the T intersection, my legs gradually quickening their pace, I realized how wrong I really was.

The line of people at the bus stop was long enough that not even two buses would be enough to hold them all. They must have been running behind schedule. A man in the back noticed me. The moment he raised his voice, everyone's *eyes* were immediately upon me.

—Oh, no. This is bad.

Shrinking back at the chorus of cheers, my face turned ashen when I saw the clock hanging from the bus stop.

My drawn-out groan was quashed by the drone of the cicadas.

*

"Dahhh! I knew it…"

The school gate was already closed, not offering enough space for a single straggler to get through.

Of course, if it *did* allow people to get through, it wouldn't serve much purpose as a gate. Thinking about it that way, it was doing a hell of a job.

August 14th, 9:10 a.m.

It was no longer a matter of being on time. I was so late, I had cut out the entire first period of summer school.

I had successfully dodged all the autograph-seekers at the bus stop, but by then, my schedule was already ruined.

My luck ran out for good when I started running down the main thoroughfare, the shortest route—a truly desperate decision.

On the street, one of my lovey-dovey songs, the sort of thing I couldn't deny was far too over-the-top, was being played at high volume. Posters advertising my new single were tacked up all over the place.

A large plasma screen showed me dancing in an outfit that looked bent on smothering me in frills. The record shop underneath the screen was selling my new CD (debuting today, of course), and a line of people snaked out the door, hoping for a chance at the free limited-edition poster on offer.

"If I hadn't been passing by just then, who knows what would've happened to you…"

My manager's car, parked in front of the school, was a miniature utopia of air-conditioning. The short-haired woman in the driver's seat had her arms draped over the steering wheel. She mumbled with the drone of a woman exhausted after a hard day's work, even though it was still morning.

"I…I'm sorry. But it wasn't my fault! I think the buses were running late today or something, so there were all these students…"

I tried my best to defend myself, but was stopped by a long, fatigued sigh.

"Listen, I understand how you feel…and I know you think commuting by car would make you stand out too much."

"Um…yeah…"

"I want to respect your wishes as much as I can, but…Well, I'm just not sure it's practical any longer. I think we're going to have to talk about this again soon."

She seemed terribly apologetic about it. I felt terribly apologetic about myself.

After a moment of quiet, I looked at my watch. The first period was just about to end.

"…Ah! I need to go…! Uh, I'll call you later! Sorry!"

I hopped out the passenger door, turned around, and bowed at my manager in apology. She waved me off, a resigned smile on her face.

After bowing one more time as she turned off the hazard lights and drove away, I walked along the wall encompassing the school grounds and building, headed for the employee entrance. I could feel beads of sweat on my forehead, formed by the temperature difference between the brisk car interior and outside. The furor of the morning's events had already made me sweaty to the point that my uniform shirt was sticking to my back, so it wasn't much of an issue. Running around in this heat would make anyone perspire, no matter how much of a glittery sixteen-year-old your branding makes you out to be.

Awful. Just awful. I want to go home and take a shower.

The bell began to ring just as I reached the edge of the school wall.

Crap. My second remedial class was starting in just ten minutes.

I jogged up to the employee entrance and pushed the small intercom button. After a few seconds,

the speaker crackled to life.

Even through this cheap speaker, you could still hear a subdued, alien murmur of noise in the background, that classic trademark of school life. The thought of spending the whole day in that clamor was easily enough to fill my heart with gloom.

"Can I help you?"

"Oh, hello! Momo Kisaragi, year one…I'm late to my remedial classes, but would I be able to ge in…?"

I couldn't guess how many times I've spoken with this office receptionist.

It's been about four months since I came here, but this may be the woman I've spoken to the most. It was sad to think that these little intercom chats were taking up more than ninety percent of my school conversations.

"Ah, yes, Miss Kisaragi. I'll unlock the door, so head over to the faculty room for me, please."

If there was anything I could take comfort in, it lay in how she didn't ask me why, or get angry at me, or even make any unusual note of it any longer.

"Thanks…Sorry."

The lock made a clunking sound, and I pushed open the door to the school grounds.

The door closed automatically, locking itself shut with another clunk.

The school grounds were infused with a sort of cool, refreshing atmosphere you never found outside. It was summer break, but the place was still open for club activities and summer-school students.

—I had only just enrolled this spring.

The school building, freshly renovated two years ago, had a fetching Western-style design to it, almost too gaudy for its intended purpose. It wasn't quite up to the level of the glittering all-girl private academies you saw in shoujo manga, but it had everything from a needlessly elegant clock tower to little creeks, fountains, and nude bronze statues dotting the grounds.

As if that weren't enough, these weird tunnels made out of vines and grass and so forth seemed to be everywhere you looked.

I don't know who came up with this, but setting up this mistaken attempt at a fancy boarding school in the middle of a crowded cityscape was, I thought, just adding more chaos to the landscape. But—and it should have been expected—it was apparently a hit with young women, enough so that the school was constantly near the top of the prefecture in application count.

This school caught my attention for very non-fairy-tale reasons (it was close to my house), but really, for someone like me with an overwhelming lack of study skills, getting accepted was nothing but pure coincidence.

There were already a hopeless number of absences and tardies in my record, so I was going to summer school to make up for it. But even if I won the perfect-attendance award yearly, I'd probably still be forced into these remedial courses. That much, at least, I was confident of.

I was also out of time.

Scrambling for the faculty room as fast as I could, I clambered up three flights of stairs before reaching the glass door. Opening it brought me back to a blissful world of air-conditioned comfort once more. Standing in a chilly room made me all the more aware of how much sweat was dripping off me.

I picked up my bag and slippers next to the shoe locker and hurriedly changed into my indoor footwear.

"Agh! It can't be that late already!…Oww!"

As I folded up my slipper bag and bent over to remove the one for my outdoor shoes, something hard hit me on the head.

Surprised, I looked up at a large man in a lab coat carrying an attendance ledger.

"Uh…Ha-ha-ha! I…um, good morning?"

"Was that meant as a question? If so, then yeah, it *is* still morning. Barely."

"Y-yeah…"

Oh, no. I forgot that my first period today was taught by my homeroom teacher.

I could slip past the other teachers, but this was one man I couldn't fool.

"You know, I'm not the sort of guy who likes to quibble about lateness, but I think you should have a look at this."

"Hmm? What's this…? Whaaaaa?!"

He took a paper out from the attendance ledger and handed it to me. It was enough to make me turn white.

"You know what this is, right? Is that much clear enough?"

"It's my Biology I test…The one from last week."

"Ah, good. Glad that's understood. Now, do you know what the number written next to your name means?"

"Um…heh-heh. I'm not sure I do, actually…Ow!"

He hit me with his ledger again. His expression never changes, so I always have to stay on my guard around him. He's impossible to dodge, too.

"Look. Your handwriting's a bit…unique. Nonscientific, I could say. That I don't mind, but after two weeks of remedial courses, you get a two? Are we gonna have to be here a hundred weeks before you get a perfect score?"

The result of the test in my hands was devastating.

I made the effort to write an answer down for every single question. Not a single one went unnoticed. But, save for one, there was a red X next to each response.

The sight was unreal. I could feel myself getting dizzy.

"But…but I studied and everything…"

"What? Are you kidding?! You call this 'studying'?! Look at this. 'Question: Name one type of mammal. Answer: Crab or salmon.' *That's* studying?!"

"W-well, my mother ate a lot of those back when she grew up on the coast in Hokkaido, so…I, I mean, I was wavering between that and 'Deer or bear,' so…"

"Yes! Them! That's right!…Why are you going on about your mother's homeland in a bio test?! And why are you giving me *pairs*?! It says only one!"

"What's wrong with that? That'd be too lonely, having only one of them!"

"Why are you trying to get all fancy with your test answers? You're making no sense at all! Besides, if you put a deer and a bear together, the deer's gonna get eaten!"

"E-eaten…?!"

Wavering against this barrage of criticism, I took another look at my test paper.

I was completely befuddled by what could have caused this. I put every fiber of my body into taking this test, and the results were just brutal. What would my mom say if I showed this to her…? I didn't even want to imagine it.

—It's always like this.

No matter what I do, I wind up with these crazy results. And every time, I can feel people's *eyes* honing in on me.

Back in fourth or fifth grade, I drew a picture in class that happened to catch the eye of a famous author. He put it on the cover of his novel, and that novel wound up being a huge bestseller.

Once I reached middle school I was recruited by the art club, and the work I submitted to a contest held at the beginning of my first year completely dominated the club president's submission on its way to winning first prize nationwide. It was around that time when I began to feel the eyes of people around me gathering around not just my work, but myself.

In my second year, I quit the art club; it was getting too uncomfortable for me and the other members. My afternoons were suddenly free, and while on a meandering after-school shopping trip, I began to get scouted more and more often by talent agents. I turned them down at first. The agency that reps me now just happened to call me up while my mother was having a few problems with work. I figured I would try to help keep the lights on a little.

That was really the only reason. I had no particular interest in television or music. But even I had to admit it—I adored the idea of being a pop idol, going onstage and singing for the masses.

My first gig as a would-be idol was to serve as the warm-up for one of the more established acts at the agency, basically chatting with the audience for a little bit. Even now, I don't think I'm exactly gifted when it comes to public speaking but, at the time, the only thing running through my mind was "our household is riding on this; I've got to keep from getting fired, no matter what."

Once up onstage, I was so nervous that I honestly don't remember what I talked about, but I suppose you could say I was an instant success. A perfect ten, results-wise.

I had revved that audience to unheard-of levels of excitement, to the point where I was the subject of feature articles in magazines and tabloids. If there was any negative aspect, it was that I wound up becoming the main talking point of the show, not the main act I was supposed to be fronting.

So there you have it. This girl chatting onstage, not singing or dancing or anything, an anonymous rookie idol, suddenly earning a massive, rabid fan base. The agency couldn't have been happier with me, but ever since that day, the number of job offers has grown to positively scary levels, barely giving me time to breathe in between phone calls.

It defied any measure of logic or common sense. There was no reason for it. I had no attractions to

speak of. But everybody's *eyes* grew increasingly fixated upon me.

It made me realize all over again that I was far from a "normal" girl.

"Hello? Are you listening to me?"

"…Huh?! Uh, yes, sir!"

"No, you weren't. I'm not blind, you know. Is the summer heat making you faint or something?"

"No, uh, it's just that…that test was just, like, too much for me, so…Ha-ha…"

"That much I could tell, yes. I'll give you a chance at a retest next week, so…just try your best, okay?"

He looked at me with the downtrodden eyes of a man looking at a pitiful, wayward child.

"Next week?! Ughh…I'll try…"

I thought I'd tried hard enough with this test.

How am I supposed to try even harder…?

"Try not to get too tense or anything, all right? I'm sure you're still getting used to things around the school…and you've got a concert next week, right?"

"Ah…! Y-yes…I do…"

My face could not have been a very healthy-looking shade at this point. I held it down as much as I could, to not much avail.

The teacher sighed and looked at me again, this time with gentle eyes that belied his exasperation.

"Well, try not to work too hard…You can go home now, if you like. You mentioned you were shooting that TV drama today, didn't you?"

"Y-yes…Wait, no! I'll go to class, okay? There's still lots of time!"

"Didn't you see the remedial-course schedule? It's the Obon holiday, so the first-year students are only here for first period today. Class will start up again in three days. You should really be keeping track, you know."

"Whaaa?! Oh, right…"

I took out my schedule sheet. He wasn't lying. I was only scheduled for the first period today.

Of all the shameful ways to reveal to my teacher that I had been going to summer school without even looking at my schedule…

"Uh…Well, okay! See you in three days!"

"Yep. Hang in there. It can't be fun, getting no rest during the holiday like that. I need to get back to work, so be careful on the way home, all right?"

"Of course! I'll be just fine! See you later, sir!"

After a short bow, I crammed the test paper deep into my cubbyhole and stuck my slippers on top of it. Throwing on the outdoor shoes left abandoned on the faculty-room floor, I made my way out the door.

Once outside, I was greeted with a chaotic symphony of cicadas.

The sunlight I was suddenly reacquainted with mercilessly slung its murderous rays of heat upon me.

The thought of having to walk the whole way back home from here caused me to let out a dejected sigh.

"Ooooh…I should at least get something to drink first…"

There was a vending machine on the path between the faculty room and the main school grounds. Once the mere thought of thirst entered my brain, it was impossible to drive it back out. Listlessly, I proceeded down the colorful gravel path to the vending machine.

Next to the machine was one of those large, open public spaces, the kind you see in parks a lot, with an open roof made out of tree branches and vines and so on. Around the tables dotted underneath, several prim-looking female students were giggling with one another over something. They had probably just returned from watching one sports club or another hold a practice game.

The gravel path ended underneath the open space, turning into plain dirt. The moment I set foot inside, every one of the girls immediately turned toward me.

"Ah…!"

I shrank back for a moment, but they didn't appear to regard me with too much enmity or excessive interest. They gave me light smiles, then briskly exited the open space, whispering to one another in hushed voices.

They were already gone by the time I tried to smile back at them. I could feel the sweat flow out of me, out of embarrassment or whatever else it was.

With a sigh, I walked up to the vending machine.

All the charmingly colorful labels pulled my attention in multiple directions, but I was firmly resolute. Only one drink could possibly wipe away the emotions I was dealing with right now.

My eyes lit up when I caught sight of the black soda inside the plastic bottle, one whose shape was particularly unique among all the other selections.

I took the pig-shaped change purse I had used for many years from my bag's side pocket, flipped open the rear, and checked to make sure I had the right amount.

Sticking my hand inside the pig's back, I thrust the coins I found into the machine slot.

The moment they fell inside, the buttons all lit up red, almost like a "go" sign for my throat.

My aim was focused on one button in particular. Like the first alien-encounter scene in that one Western film I saw as a kid, I slowly brought my finger forward. When I pushed the button in, there was a beep, and in too short a time for me to measure or comprehend, the bottle appeared in the receptacle.

I resisted the urge to glug down the entire bottle right there, one hand sassily resting on a cocked hip, every inch the lovely sixteen-year-old sitting down to enjoy her drink. The shaken-up bottle of carbonated drink product dangled from my fingers—but when in Rome, you know?

Sitting at a table a distance removed from the vending machine, I unscrewed the cap on my much-anticipated soda.

I had managed to keep my expression neutral up until now, but for this instant of bliss, there was nothing I could do. With the light *psshh*, my nostrils instinctively flared at the trademark lightly sweet scent from the lip of the bottle. If I had a mirror to look at right now, my face probably would have been unfilmable, something that would've horrified my agency. With that, I let the soda flow down my throat.

Ahh…Whoever invented this drink must have absolutely *hated* summer…

In fact, it seemed almost insulting to call this something as common as "soda."

It was mankind's only tool for defending itself against the looming rage of the season's heat.

I felt something hot well up around my eyes. The first sip was complete.

It would've been refreshingly satisfying to then slam the bottle on the table, a low, guttural groan of delight escaping my lips. But that, at the very least, I had to restrain myself from.

An impartial observer would have noticed nothing unusual. Just an innocent girl having a drink and replacing the cap on the bottle. But my heart was filled with a sense of achievement, like a bent-over old man polishing off a pint of strawberry milk after a soak at the local public bath. I felt an urge to shout "Ooh, that really hit the *spot*!"

Once my refreshment session was complete, I took a deep breath. Here, in the shade, the heat seemed more tolerable than before. I began to think about my plans for the rest of the day.

"I've got some free time now, so I…um…?"

I looked at my watch. It still read fifteen minutes after eight. I recoiled for a moment, then remembered that it was stopped when I woke up this morning. My mother bought it for my birthday last year. I kind of liked it. It was far too soon for it to die on me, and I didn't recall abusing it to the point where it'd break on me, so the batteries must have been dead. I could have my idiot brother look at it when I get home.

Reluctantly, I took out my touchscreen phone, pink cover attached. I always carried it around, but it saw use almost exclusively for work-related contacts.

I supposed I would be using this phone like a pro-level high schooler if I spent every night talking with my besties about my favorite TV programs, or what true love is, or whatever. But I didn't watch much TV—samurai dramas were about it—and I would need to make some friends first before I could start talking about love.

I was fully aware of why this was so, but it never struck me as a particularly inconvenient state of affairs. Still, I never liked using this phone much. Every time I picked it up, my mind would fill up with this sort of abject emptiness. I didn't know why.

"Nine thirty…We start shooting at two, so I need to be home by one, but…"

Tapping the schedule app on my phone, I was rewarded with a dizzying array of business appointments.

August 14th was busy as always. I had the TV drama shoot at two p.m., an appearance at a live talk–radio show starting at six, and a concert rehearsal after that.

My manager was scheduled to drive over and pick me up at one.

I was used to it, but the sheer congestion of my schedule as of late was enough to trigger my depression. After that first stage act, I was bombarded with all kinds of offers. The work that arose from that single appearance had completely changed my life. My concert next week was meant to commemorate the single that launched today. Apparently it was almost unheard of for a singer to score a solo show so soon after her CD debut.

It was all great. It made me happy and everything, but that song was filled with all kinds of bad memories for me.

Chiefly, this was because I caught a terrible cold on the day of recording. My manager chewed me out, and as if that wasn't bad enough, the extremely nasal voice I had to use during recording made my producer explode with glee. I had "beautifully expressed the dilemma of a young girl's unrequited romance," he told me, and that was the take they used on the CD.

I was too dazed by the fever to really notice anything at the time, but later on, when I heard my nasal-voiced song start to play across town, my appetite immediately dropped to half its normal level. Summer vacation is one thing, but thinking about how I was supposed to go around school once the new semester started made me grow even more morose.

I sighed, tensed up by my thoughts. The boiling heat was dragging my spirits further downward.

I could feel the sweat, which had busily cycled between nothing and free-flow all day, once again gradually bead up on my forehead.

"I should just go home…"

No point sticking around here. I put the phone in my pocket and stood up.

Feeling a lightly cool sensation from my legs as they freed themselves from the chair, I turned my eyes toward a faraway point. Across the school building, all around the fairly large fields that lay beyond, I could hear shouts echoing from all the sports clubs as they practiced.

This must be what they call "youth." It felt like something foreign to me, like something was rushing me right past it.

After a sigh (I couldn't guess how many that made it today), I began to walk off. As I did, I saw a flyer placed on the table where the girls had been sitting earlier.

The colorful, cartoony lettering and lineup of typically cutesy characters you see everywhere in ads revealed that it was a flyer for a new "fancy goods" shop near the rail station.

They were apparently holding a big launch event today and yesterday, with 13TH and 14TH written in large, splashy numbers.

After looking around and very carefully crossing over, I picked up the flyer, only half-interested in what it had to say.

The next moment, I couldn't believe my eyes.

"…Ahh!"

To be honest, I was never one for cutesy girl-power accessories like this store sold, but there was one photo, likely placed on the far corner of the flyer just so every square inch of the ad could be filled with *something*. LIL' SOCKEYE STRAP, the caption said. It was absolutely, unbelievably cute.

The thing was printed so small on the flyer that you could really only get an idea of its shape and general atmosphere, but judging solely by the silhouetted legs growing out of an extremely unlikely part of its body, it was definitely a shining light in the phone-strap genre.

Swallowing nervously, I turned my head around, making sure the coast was clear.

Looking at the flyer, I noticed the words LIMITED TIME ONLYfront and center, although it wasn't clear what they referred to exactly.

I took a breath, then jammed the flyer into my bag.

Glugging down the rest of the bottle, one hand sassily rested on a hip, I tossed it into the trash and hastily left the school grounds…

*

—I was dizzy, no doubt from running full-bore under the punishing sun.

The alley I had ducked into was lined with a jumble of uniformly gray buildings, likely part of a larger apartment complex. It felt like a labyrinth. The air was a little cooler, probably thanks to the shade, but I had no time to spend mulling over it.

I couldn't catch my breath.

Hunching downward, I put one hand on the wall, sweat drip-dripping off my face and leaving wet marks on the ground.

Removing my bag, I collapsed in a heap.

"Huff…huff…"

Slowly, my breathing regained its normal tempo.

My head, still not quite caught up with current events, gradually shuddered back into operation. I recalled the conversation I had just experienced, and now tears began to drop out of my eyes.

I leaned back against the wall, curling myself up, knees against my chest.

Something in me wanted to cry out with every decibel I could muster, but bad things would happen right now if I made any noise.

I pressed my face against my bag, but my eyes were still a flash flood of tears. I had no idea what would happen to me.

Why did it have to turn out like this?
I wish I never had this kind of body.
I want to speak normally, to go shopping normally, to *live* normally.
I have no idea what I am, and I wish I could just erase it all.
I wish I could've just died alone! Alone, with nobody ever finding me!

*

Let's go back a little.

After leaving school, I visited a public bathroom to change into what I hoped were my drab, unremarkable street clothes.

But the moment I arrived at the main street on the way to the rail station, several dozen people turned their eyes toward me at once.

I couldn't have looked more different from the frilly girl on the giant plasma screen looming over town, but one by one, they came closer to me, calling my name.

Oh, crap. The moment the thought flashed across my mind, it was too late.

The street would just begin to get crowded around this time of day. I hadn't thought my plan out far enough.

In a moment, a crowd had formed. I couldn't go anywhere, forward or backward.
They all had their phones in hand, trying to take pictures of me with their cameras.

In a flash, the crowd grew even deeper. All I could do was stare at the 360-degree wall of cameras pointed at me.

Did I do something wrong?
I didn't have enough self-awareness. That much was my fault.

But still, I wanted to at least try to act like a normal girl, just a little more.
That's all.

The noise of the constantly clicking shutters, coupled with the murmur from the growing crowd, was a harsh static like none I'd heard before. The suddenness of it all nauseated me. Just as I thought I was about to collapse, a police siren washed out the sound instantly.

It was not that narrow a sidewalk, but apparently the crowd had bubbled out into traffic to the point where someone called the authorities. But they still didn't let me through. If anything, I felt like the siren was a huge billboard in itself, beckoning yet more onlookers to snuff me out.

But I was the one calling them all to me.

The *eyes* of everyone on this street were locked in.

A number of police officers clawed their way toward me through the crowd.

One of them placed a hand on my shoulder, barking some command. The next moment, I plunged into the ever-so-small hole in the crowd they had created.

I tried to keep going forward, but it was like an endless tunnel to me.

I felt like the writhing masses were going to crush me, and the road ahead grew narrower and narrower.

Groping around for purchase, I felt someone pulling my hand forward.

The next thing I knew, the way was clear before me, giving me a full view of the wide street.

I wondered who had rescued me. I had no time to find out.

Hurriedly, I broke into a run, but when I turned around, I could see the throng chasing after me, like they had all merged into one larger creature.

I escaped down a side alley, which reduced their numbers, but now they had scattered, pursuing me with phones in hand.

Pressing down the road, I kept running, no destination in mind, choosing whatever twist and turn seemed the most convoluted and hidden.

I could no longer tell up from down. All that mattered was running.

"Ah…!"

I ran down a narrow path, only to find it terminate at a dead end.

Turning around in a panic, I found that retracing my steps was not an option.

—My chest burned. I could hardly breathe.

I stood there, spent, my thought processes shut down, and then my phone began to ring.

Flustered, I looked at the screen. It was my manager.

I tentatively answered the call. From a room alive with the sounds of phone conversations, my manager began to speak, almost in a snarl.

"Hello?! Where *are* you?!"

"I, I don't know…I, uh…"

"The police just called the agency. This entire place is in a panic! Ugh…Why did you have to do this *now*, of all times?"

"Um, I…I'm sorry that—"

"Do you even *realize* what you are right now?! Listen! You aren't a 'normal' girl, all right? You should have *known* that this would happen!"

"…ormal?"

"Hmm? What did you say? Speak up so I can hear you…!"

"Am…am I really that abnormal?! I changed clothes and everything…but they all…they all looked at me, like I was some weird *thing*…! I, I can't take this! I'm not going back anymore…! Thank you

for everything!"

"What…? Wait, wait a—"

I ended the call, not bothering to hear her response.

What did I just say? I had only barely caught my breath. My mind was still subfunctional.

All I knew was that I had done something very, very bad, and I thought I understood how much trouble I had just put upon so many people. But, no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't will myself to call back and apologize. Anything but that.

Amid the incessant whine of the cicadas, the faraway sounds of traffic, and the feeble vibration I felt from the air vent along the wall, time passed. How much, I didn't know.

I didn't think anyone had pursued me into the alley I was slumped down inside, but I could no longer move, sitting there as the seconds floated on by.

I wondered if my mother had heard about what happened yet.

She had always cheered me on, no matter what. Nobody was happier for me when news of my CD release broke.

I was so happy to see that. It made everything else seem worth it.

And now I've gone and stabbed her in the back, too.

All I thought about was myself, and now I've messed up all these other people's lives…

These emotions I was powerless to repress welled up into tears, one after the other, flowing out of my eyes.

I thought about going off to some faraway land, but no matter where I went, there was probably no escaping other people's eyes. I knew that much already. I knew how "abnormal" I was by this point…

Suddenly, a deeper sense of anxiety coursed across my heart.

Casually, I removed my face from the bag and turned to the side. The sight I saw there made my heart jump out of my throat.

"Ah…Aaahhhh!!"

I lost my balance, my body unprepared for sudden physical activity, and I landed sprawled out on the ground.

Someone was standing at the exit of the dead-end alley.

It was the middle of summer, but the hood on his long-sleeved jacket was covering his head, his long hair flowing out from the sides.

The surprise was that this man was close enough to me that I could have reached out and touched him.

Did he silently make his way all the way over here? If he did, I was in deep trouble.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out.

On the ground, unable to move or defend myself, I was in what I suppose you'd call "dire straits."

"Oh, uh…Sorry. I wasn't trying to surprise you or anything like that…"

I heard a slightly husky, yet warm female voice emanate from the hood.

"…Eh?"

I was already seeing my life flash before my eyes, prepared for whatever horrible fate would befall me. I could barely manage a pathetic reply to her kind words.

Looking up at her again, I spotted a refined-looking face and pale white skin.

By the way she carried herself I assumed she was a man, but she was female…and one who most people would classify as beautiful.

I was still on the ground. She knelt down so our eyes could meet, took another look around our surroundings, then spoke in hushed tones.

"I saw all that…stuff that just happened. That was quite a show you put on there."

"That…stuff?"

"The crowd on the sidewalk. I didn't think it'd erupt into such a huge thing like that, though."

If she had caught all that, that meant she had pursued me all the way from the massive mob to this empty alleyway.

So was she just another one of the rabble, another curious onlooker hoping for a peek at me…?

The bleak depression from before returned to the forefront, this time mixed with a smattering of anger.

"I…I'm quitting all of this, okay? So please…please, stop chasing me! Uh…I mean, if you want an autograph, then okay, but…"

Huh. Look at that. I really *could* say what I really thought sometimes.

And if I got that much across, that should hopefully make her understand. She seemed like a sensible enough woman.

For an emergency like this, I could whip up an autograph no problem. I prayed it was enough to make her happy.

Gingerly, I opened my eyes to gauge her response. She looked blankly at me, her stare indicating she had no idea what I was talking about.

"Um…No, I mean, I wasn't chasing you, and I don't need your autograph either. But you quit your career for this…?"

The response was wildly off the mark from the reaction I expected.

She wasn't pursuing me? So if she's not a fan of mine, then…

I felt my anxiety ease off a little bit before tightening once more.

If she wasn't a fan, then was she here to kidnap me or something like that?

Does she want to take me for ransom?! I don't have anywhere to run! This is really, really *bad*!

But the woman didn't attack me. She simply stood there, hands thrust into her pockets.

She then took out a cell phone, no cover, completely unadorned.

"It's still a bit before the appointed time. I guess it's just an accident that you showed up here, but this actually works out great. We're right nearby, too."

"Huh? The appointed time…?"

"Hmm? I'm pretty sure I was told one p.m. Or did I get that wrong?"

I took out my own phone and looked at the screen. The amount of missed calls and messages waiting for me on the standby screen was getting a tad out of hand.

The reality facing me was now exposed in plain, digital form, making me feel like I had taken a heavy ball of iron and swallowed it whole.

The readout notified me that it was exactly half past ten.

One p.m…The appointed time…

"Oh…"

Now it all made sense to me.

This woman was part of the film crew for the TV drama.

That would explain why she followed me all the way from the initial chaos, even though she swore she wasn't part of the crowd.

The fact that she was aware of the one p.m. meet-up time with my manager made it all the more likely. The agency probably sent her over once they heard about the chaos to make sure I would make it to shooting on time.

Still, I was no longer in any mood to say "Oh, sure, no problem, I hear you loud and clear."

I had just clearly told this woman that I had decided to quit.

Yet she was still intent on taking me with her…which was her job, yes, but I was no longer interested in blindly following orders.

I forced myself up to my feet and spoke to this woman, already walking toward the alley exit.

"Um…I decided to quit my job. And I don't want to go back home for a while, either, so…like, do you understand what I mean?"

This time, I was calmer, more collected with my words. Surely she would get the message this time.

"…Sure, sure, I know you've made up your mind. So would you mind just following me for now?"

Her expression was gentler as she looked me in the eye and began walking again.

I could see the wisdom in fleeing from this woman and finding another hole to hide in. But I couldn't. She seemed to understand me. She knew my mind was made up, and her expression made her seem trustworthy enough.

If I went to the studio, my manager would be waiting for me.

She would be absolutely livid, no doubt about that.

Imagining the all-time mother of lectures looming in my future, I could feel my tear ducts loosening up already.

But I had to tell her. I had to make it clear.

I wanted this to end today.

I would explain everything about how I felt, I would accept all the rage that I'd get for it, and that would be that.

My resolve fully regained, I followed in the woman's footsteps.

Once I was by her side, I realized that the segment of my face I had pushed into the bag was a wet mess of tears and sweat and…whatever else.

"Ugh…"

"Mm? Something wrong?"

"No, uh…It's nothing."

"…You sure? I mean, you'll definitely want to wash that bag and your clothing later."

I could feel my face burn like fire, as if someone had taken a match to it.

"Y…yeah…"

Her perception was sharp. Whoever she was, she was no doubt gifted in her job.

After spending what seemed like the entire day running from this, running from that, I wanted nothing more than a cold shower.

I let this desire occupy my brain as I walked, keeping a little distance behind the woman in the jacket.

We made a right out of the dead end, then a left at the second intersection afterward. Next we took the first small pathway on the right, followed it to the end, made a left…

I followed the woman as she silently kept walking, not exchanging a word of conversation.

It felt like we were diving deep into the far reaches of town. I'd had no idea any of these streets existed.

If I recalled correctly, the scene we were scheduled to shoot today involved me visiting the house of a "less-than-wealthy" friend.

It made sense. The multifamily units and apartment buildings that lined the streets were not exactly breathtaking.

The crew was no doubt busily preparing for the shoot right now. I was unsure how I would broach the subject of my decision.

My stomach hurt terribly.

"Over here."

Without warning, the woman in the jacket stopped and changed direction.

She was pointing toward a narrow, dimly lit corridor, one that made the twisty passages we were navigating up until now seem like opulent multilane boulevards.

The pathway, just barely wide enough for a person to travel through, was lined on both sides by

thin wooden fencing and the walls of apartment complexes.

"Wow, this is pretty narrow…"

Without answering, the woman plunged down the path, inducing me to reluctantly follow her. A shortcut to our shoot location, perhaps? It was starting to seem a bit odd.

Once inside the corridor, the sensation of being a lab rat in a maze was overwhelming.

If I turned a corner and a giant insect or something was waiting to attack me, where could I escape to?

I was carefully advancing forward, taking care with each step, when I came to an abrupt halt. The sneakers of the woman I was following were stopped in front of me.

"Here we are."

She pointed to a door, the number 107 on it, nearby the halfway point of the corridor. The wooden fencing stopped just long enough to allow for the door.

"What? Here?!"

Before I could finish, she opened the door and went inside.

"H-hey, wait a…Hey!"

The door closed, leaving me completely alone outside.

Taking a more careful look at the building, I saw nothing but a sheer wall of concrete above the wooden fence. No windows, no nothing.

It looked like no residence I was aware of; it was more like a warehouse or aboveground fallout shelter. And yet there was the number 107 on the door, its purpose an enigma.

"This…this really isn't my 'friend's house,' is it?"

If this *was* my friend's house in the TV show, her parents must be moonlighting as mad scientists. A trip to my friend and her dad's illegal human-experimentation lab wouldn't have been completely out of the question for episode two of the series, but given that this was still the premiere we were shooting, you'd expect at least a little more background plot first.

The building obviously looked sketchy, but for some reason, I was gripped by the urge to try opening the door.

There were no other entrances to the building, no other nearby addresses, and yet this was 107. It piqued me, somehow.

"Well…not like I know how to get back anyway. Guess I got no choice."

Unable to bottle my curiosity, I took a breath and opened the door. As I expected, this definitely *wasn't* the house of my teen girlfriend.

The moment the door was opened, I was greeted by a long, rectangular space, around the size of a

roomy living room.

Bare pipes ran across the ceiling, and the room was lit by a large number of unadorned lightbulbs hanging freely below the piping. Otherwise, the space was well adorned with fancy furniture—a table, a sofa, a small wooden armoire with a globe on top of it. For all the world, it looked every bit like a secret hideout was supposed to look.

I could see all the usual home appliances around the complex, from the TV and microwave to the computer and refrigerator. The air conditioner was on, and the place certainly *felt* lived in.

The atmosphere was still odd, however, what with the old, plainly non-Japanese volumes that lined a beat-up bookcase. It might be more accurately described as a witches' coven, assuming the witches didn't want to give up their modern conveniences.

Four doors were spaced evenly across the far wall. The idea that there were more rooms to discover deeper inside made me ponder what kind of structural plan this building had.

The woman from earlier was standing in front of the kitchen next to the entrance, fully stocked with an array of cooking tools. Taking another look around, I once again failed to find any TV staff or filming equipment.

The sense of foreboding I felt ever since we arrived slowly began to take center stage in my mind.

"Er…Could I ask where we're…?"

"Hey, Kano, here she is. You mind giving her the whole spiel for me…? Hey, wake up!"

The hooded woman, just as uninterested in my questions as before, prodded the figure lying on the sofa.

His body shuddered slightly, and I heard a slow, drowsy voice respond.

"Mmmnghh…Mmm? Whudda you mean, 'she'?"

Moving his face away from the magazine that was covering it, a tired-looking man with narrow, catlike eyes revealed himself.

"The new girl. The one you said would be showing up today? *You're* the one who made all the arrangements."

"Oh, uh…Yeah, but…like, why is she…?"

"You mind shaking the cobwebs out for me, man? Just give her the story."

"Huh. Well, okay. Whatever."

The man she called Kano sat up on the sofa. He took a look at me and flashed an eerie smile, as if just remembering something.

"Um…Can I…um…?"

"Welcome, newbie, to the Mekakushi-dan! Thank you very much for helping us out with our operation!"

Standing up and giving me a brisk, gentler smile than before, he began to energetically regale me, talking over my stilted question.

"Currently, we're involved with things like evading the 'eyes' of the police as we infiltrate really dangerous places and, you know, borrow a couple things. Stuff like that. I'll fill you in on all the details later…Well, okay, not *all* the details, maybe. You know what I mean. Like, I want to fill you in on everything I can, though. Anyway, this is our hideout. Maybe you guessed this already, but you thank that lady sitting there with that death stare of hers—oh, don't give me that look! Yeah, yeah.

Kido, then. She's our boss. But don't let her scare you—it's real comfy in here, once you get used to stuff. Anyway, all this decor is her doing. As far as our member roster goes, there's her, there's me… Oh, I'm Kano, by the way. Us, and around two others…well, maybe three, if things turn out. That's about all of us. We don't usually do much in, like, the public eye, so to speak, but, you know, we like to keep things loose around here. Uh, what else…?"

"W-wait! Wait a second! Um…the meka-what? Dangerous places…? We're, we're still talking about today's drama shoot, right? Where's the director? I…I came here to tell you I'm not gonna be an idol anymore! But you…You…Who *are* you guys?!"

My mind had completely failed to catch up with this sudden turn of events. I had far too much to ask.

Was this all part of some scene or another…? It couldn't be.

The script handed to me a few days ago was just your textbook high-school romance story.

There was nothing in it about hideouts or "infiltration" or anything.

I had to speak up because he was giving me this whole tale in the most matter-of-fact tone of voice. They've definitely got the wrong girl here. Help out with their "operation"…? I had entertained aspirations of trying a little part-time work for a change of pace, but nothing like *this*.

"…Hang on a second. You're a pop idol…? Kano, what is going *on* here?"

The hooded woman—Kido, the boss, whatever you wanted to call her—stormed up to Kano, who did nothing but nod and smile at every question I had just asked.

"What do you mean, what? She's, like, all the rage right now. See? Look."

Kano opened up the magazine he'd shielded his head with earlier and showed the boss a page.

The issue had a special feature devoted to the single I was debuting today. Oh, lord, I *hated* that photo they took of me. They used the pic for the two-page opening spread, and my eyes are half-closed. Awful.

The hooded woman snatched the magazine away and peered at it, the color gradually leaving her face as she cycled her gaze between me and the article.

"You…She…You told me you had promised to meet this new candidate today and wanted to check up on her first…You said you wanted her to join up if we liked her…"

"Yep. Sure did. All lies."

"You said she had 'potential'…! You made me drag a public celebrity over here, Kano!…And you *lied* to me?!"

She repeatedly rapped her knuckles on my face in the article as she continued her griping.

I'm right here, you know…She could have at least a little courtesy.

"Yeah, I know I lied, but I didn't think you were listening. You just sat there listening to your music. Like, you didn't even acknowledge I was talking to you! Then you go out by yourself and bring her back here on your own volition? If you ask me, this is more *your* fault than mine."

"I went out by myself because I kept shaking you and you wouldn't wake up! If you were awake that whole time, why didn't you at least *call* me?!"

"Because you never pick up! You're, like, always listening to music on that thing anyway! Like

some sad, friendless nerd, you know? That, and I didn't feel like bothering."

"Oh, so instead you made me go out and—"

"—Um, *excuse* me!"

The two of them simultaneously turned toward me. The man called Kano was smiling as always, but the other woman looked far more hostile at the moment.

"Um…so, is it fair to say this is all a big mistake, then…?"

After I hesitantly asked the question, the woman called Kido rubbed a frustrated hand on her hooded head, sighed, and answered.

"Well…it looks that way. Sorry for the confusion. You can go ahead and leave if—"

She stopped midway, suddenly realizing something. The color drained from her face all over again.

Simultaneously, Kano, who had sat back down on the sofa, began to softly giggle to himself.

"*You!* You knew this was the wrong girl the whole time and you just told her *everything*! We can't let her go if she knows what we're doing, can we?!"

"Ha-ha-ha…Well, come on, Kido! You kept bugging me to give her the story, right? Oh, man, what a trip this is—"

Kano was sadly prevented from any further gloating by a sudden fist to the head.

Kido, so calm and emotionless for most of the short time I had known her, had transformed. Her expression belied panic and rage. The casual thought came to me that she couldn't have been too far removed from me agewise, maybe a little older.

I imagine I should have been a bit more anxious, but if anything, I felt fairly serene. It was as if these people were incapable of instilling fear or nervousness in others. They were odd, of course, what with calling themselves a "dan" like they were a gang or something and living in an oddly well-decorated hideout, but I somehow couldn't will myself to see them as bad people.

"Um…"

I opened my mouth to ask a question, but was cut off once again.

"Ughh…Look, what's your name?"

"Huh?"

Kido, sighing as she asked the question, took a seat next to her cohort.

"I said, your name. Mine's Kido. This dingbat over here is Kano."

She was female, no doubt, but her manner of speaking was more gender-neutral than anything else. It was hard to gauge her personality.

The man next to her, still smiling gleefully despite the "dingbat" evaluation, looked fairly mature at first glance, but upon further review, he couldn't have been that much older than me either.

"Oh, uh, my name's Momo Kisaragi. I'm sixteen years old, and…"

I instinctively gave my age alongside my name. It was not something I would call a habit per se, but she reminded me of the judges I dealt with during my auditions.

Ugh. I did *not* need to be reminded of that. I fretted over the idea they would treat me like some bubble-headed idol, all too ready to flout her fame around others.

"Kisaragi, huh? You sure are an idol, I guess, what with giving your age alongside your name and all."

See? This is *awful*.

"No! I didn't mean that! It was just an accident! I'm not in the habit of doing that or acting like this is an audition or anything! I mean, I don't have any friends or anything, so when I get talking, I kind of get carried away and say weird things sometimes! Ha-ha…ha-ha-ha…"

—The silence was painful. I wanted to crawl into a hole and have someone shovel dirt over me.

"Yeah? Hmm. Must be pretty tough."

"Y-yeah…"

Now they're taking pity on me.

Kano began snickering again. Kido silenced him, this time with a shot to the stomach.

"I'm not really sure what to do…Really, to be honest, I'd love to just send you back home right now, but now that we've revealed all of this to you, that would be kind of bad for us."

"I guess so…now that I've heard all that…"

"Thanks to this idiot here."

"Ha-ha-ha! I told you, Kido, this is all *your* fault by this…Okay! Maybe not!"

The moment Kido turned her head, Kano immediately began to backpedal, arms held to the side to protect his stomach.

"You know, though, maybe this isn't as terrible as you think. I was looking at this live feed on the net earlier, and, like, that 'trait' you have is amazing."

The net…? Live feed? Video from that horror show out on the street? I had no idea so many people saw that.

"Amazing? Her?"

"Oh, for sure. Hey, did you always have a tendency to attract attention to yourself? Like, even before you started being an idol?"

"Huh? Uh…yes. Yes, I did."

Something about way he used the word "trait" agitated me.

Noting my response, Kano lightened her stare, her attention diverted to this new discovery.

"Judging by the scene out there, it's a pretty strong trait, too, right? I'm impressed you decided to be an idol at all."

He acted like he knew everything about me. I drew my eyes downward, feeling like he had a direct link to my heart.

"My mother was having a lot of trouble workwise for a while. I thought I would help out a little. But why…?"

"Hmm? Oh, just a hunch. 'Cause, like, even by celebrity standards, that's not normal. How much people are drawn to you, I mean. It's like the total opposite of Kido. Man, if Marie were anything like you, I bet she woulda offed herself by now. Ha-ha-ha!"

"Marie's special. Anyway, that's a whole different thing."

"Yeah, true. Speaking of which, where is she? Do you think she's still angry?"

"Um…I think I've kind of lost track here…"

That was understating it. I was in a state of utter confusion. They didn't seem like bad people, but I

still had no idea who they were, no idea what would happen to me next.

"Oh! Sorry, sorry. Um…well, just have a seat, all right?"

"Okay…"

The two of them pointed me to a sofa between themselves and the table.

Sitting directly across from Kano, I began to feel like this was turning into a *very* unexpected intervention.

"To put it as simply as possible…like, how Kido mentioned earlier too, letting you go home right now would present us with a few problems. So I want you to stay with us for a little while. I know that's, like, an enormous inconvenience to you, so in exchange, you could say, we have a proposal."

"A…proposal?"

"Yeah. To sum up, we can cure you of your body's, uh, tendencies. More like 'suppress' them, maybe? I think we can help with that. If you need us to, of course…That's about all we can offer, right, Kido?"

"Looks like it, yes. But either way, right now, we can't let you leave."

This was the most unbelievable thing I had heard all day.

It was the first time I ever met someone who offered to do something about my "tendency."

But it went without saying that I couldn't easily accept it.

Judging by this conversation, it was entirely possible they were just trying to get on my good side.

How could they "cure" me of anything in the first place? It's not like I was sick, exactly.

If I could have done anything about it, I would have long ago. But I didn't have a clue.

"Well…um…If you could cure it, that'd be great, but…"

"Yeah, see? I figured you wanted to be rid of it. You sure can't control it, I can tell that much. Everybody's got their own natural traits, of course, so we're gonna have to test out a few different approaches as we go, but…"

"Test out?"

Could I *really* place my trust upon these people?

I had just met them, I knew nothing about their backgrounds, and they were definitely into *something* bad.

But at the same time, I had never met anyone before who understood what my body was doing to me.

That faint hope—"if I could ever get to be normal"—was now so strong, it drove me to rely upon these perfect strangers at my time of need.

"You know, though, this kind of brings back memories. Remember that conversation we had, Kido?"

Peering into my face, Kano closed his eyes, as if trying to remember something.

"Yeah…I do, maybe."

"You were still pretty cute back then, Kido. All, like, 'Oooh, I'm gonna disappear if this keeps up, help meeee' and—*ow ow ow*!"

Before he could finish, Kido grabbed Kano, taking a firm grip of his side. I wondered if he would be all right. She did seem to like hitting there the most.

"I shoulda made *you* disappear first."

Despite the death grip on his side, Kano kept smiling.

"Heh-heh. All sweet memories now, aren't they…? You know, though, she isn't gonna believe us if we just, like, *say* we'll cure her. You mind showing her, Kido?"

"Why me? *You* do it."

"Yeah, but mine isn't as obvious as yours, right? It'd be easier if we had Marie here to show her, but I ain't gonna poke a stick in *that* hornet's nest yet."

"Ugh…All right. Guess it's my fault too, a little."

With that, Kido rose with a sigh and walked to the doors on the far side of the room. Opening the second one from the right, I could see something shaped like a cot inside.

"Um…what are you gonna show me?"

"Well, you know, some evidence to show why we might be able to cure that trait of yours. You'll see what I mean once she gets started."

Evidence? What kind of evidence? Is she going to cart out someone more captivating than even I am before he got these guys' treatment or whatever?

Come on. This isn't a late-night ad for some diet plan. It's not like they could show me some before/after pictures.

As I pondered this, the door closed as Kido disappeared into the room.

Kano was beaming as always. Presumably he was waiting for Kido to bring someone (?) out from the room.

I decided to wait with him, wondering what I should be expecting.

…But, after more than a minute of silence, Kido failed to return.

I turned my eyes toward the cuckoo clock on the wall, then a modern digital one nearby. Really, there's nothing that makes time go slower than waiting for something when you have no idea what it is.

His smile nailed to his face, Kano began reading a magazine as if nothing was amiss. The door stubbornly stayed shut. What was I even *doing* here?

"Um, could I—*Ahhhhh!!*"

I had just turned to Kano, ready to ask him what we were waiting for, when an unbelievable sight shook a scream out of me.

Next to Kano, as he flipped through the pages, was Kido, sitting just as she was before.

There was nothing she could have hid behind between us and the door. I didn't move out of my seat the whole time.

"Wh…wha…huh? W-why? When did you…?!"

I had leaped out of the sofa, almost sending both it and myself toppling backward. Kido looked at me coldly, telling me with her eyes that I was a tad out of line.

"Well, there you have it! Quite a surprise, huh?"

Kano, watching me grip the sofa's backrest tightly, looked like he couldn't be enjoying this more.

Kido sighed. "That was kind of over-the-top, wasn't it? Stop looking at me like you've seen a ghost or something."

"That wouldn't be far from the truth, though—*oww!*"

Kano's smile held steady against yet another punch in the side. It made me wonder if he took pride or something in his ability to keep a smile painted on at all times.

"So…so what *was* that?"

Sitting back down on the sofa, I asked about the phenomenon I had just seen.

To be honest, the sense of lingering fear made me reluctant to look directly at Kido.

"Well, Kido…You know, she's the same as you. Okay, more like the exact opposite, but *her* thing was that, ever since she was a kid, she couldn't 'get' anyone to look at her."

I listened to Kano's explanation in sheer disbelief.

"I think you probably get the picture, but you, like, totally didn't notice her, right? It's kind of like she can keep that going forever."

She had completely escaped my notice.

It was as if I had averted my gaze for one moment, and suddenly, she was there.

It felt like some kind of Houdini-style magic trick.

"Somewhere along the line she started training herself to control it, and that's where we are today. So, like, that's why I think we can help you maybe take control of your own traits a little more, so—"

I shot upward, my palms slamming against the table.

"I'll do it! I'm staying here! If…if you need any chores done, I'll do anything you need! And that… uh, "operation"? Lemme help you with that, too! So…please, *please* let me into the Mekameka-dan!!"

There's always hope left in the world, I guess.

I had to go through a lot of bad situations with this body of mine, but never in my life had my heart been so full of hope and excitement for the future.

If I stay here, I know they can cure me.

I can go out shopping like a normal girl, I can talk to people like a normal girl, I can even make friends like a normal girl!

"Oh, uh…well, great! Super! By the way, it's Mekakushi-dan. That's kind of important."

"Mekakushi-dan! Yes!! I'm ready!!"

"I really wish you'd stop using that stupid name. It's not like you're gonna have a chance to tell the general public."

Kido's muttered interjection stopped Kano and me in our tracks. I realized that my pulse had quickened in the excitement.

"Eesh, Kido, way to pee on our parade…But anyway! Welcome to the group, Kisaragi."

"Th-thank you!"

"Pretty momentous occasion, huh? Or at least it would be if the boss wasn't here to mess it all up for—*ow!* Hey, that hurt!"

I was reasonably certain his arm wasn't supposed to bend that way. But he was still smiling!

Kano must *really* be proud of that…habit. Or whatever.

I cracked a smile as I watched the exchange. It hadn't taken me long to get used to their antics. As I

smiled, the rightmost door on the far wall suddenly opened.

In it appeared a small girl, her hair white as snow, almost as if she had just stepped out of a picture-book world.

"Mm? Oh, look who finally came out! Hey, Marie…"

The girl turned toward us as her name was called. She jumped slightly, like she had seen a monster, before scurrying back into the room she came from.

"…Figures."

"Just like you'd expect, huh? Marie's so easy to predict sometimes."

"Uh, sorry about that. That was Marie just now. I'd like to get you acquainted as soon as we can, but…"

"Um…Did I do something to make her hate me?"

I was used to people looking at me with furtive, prying eyes, but that reaction was enough to make even me feel ashamed of myself.

"Nah. Don't worry about it. She's that way around everyone. Kano, could you try to get her in here for me?"

"Whaaa? No way, man. I don't wanna deal with you-know-what if I end up pissing her off."

"Well, it's your own fault she's in a snit like that in the first place. Just because she was wearing different socks than usual doesn't give you the right to laugh in her face."

"But they just looked so, like, *weird*! Besides, Kido, you didn't react to them at all. You sat there like a rock!"

"Well, that beats laughing maniacally at her, doesn't it?! Better not to react at all than react like *that*."

"Yeah, but Marie was *looking* for a reaction. That's why she came out wearing those socks in the first place. Same difference, if you ask me…But this ain't doing us any good. You go get her, okay? She's a lot more likely to come out if you do it."

"Kano, you have *got* to be—"

"Come on. I'm right, aren't I? This job calls for a woman's touch. Otherwise we'd be rocking the boat too much."

"…Ugh. All right. But don't blame me if something happens to you afterward."

Kido stood up, traveled to the far end of the room, and opened the door the girl they called Marie had peeked out from earlier.

"Agh…?!"

The moment the door was open, there was a dull thud, followed by a short yelp of surprise. Beyond the door, I could see the girl from before, teary-eyed and holding her forehead.

She had apparently stayed right by the door after returning to her room, causing it to bang her in the head when Kido opened it. The boss, her back turned to us, pointed a thumb back toward where we were seated. After a quick peek, she shook her head, tears still welled around her eyes.

"Umm…She—she obviously hates me, so…"

"Nah, nah, she's just…like, *super* shy around other people. Though it's kinda worse than usual today."

Kano returned to his magazine, rapidly flipping through the pages, apparently not too disturbed at

the sight.

The door was still open, letting me hear bits of the muted conversation as Kido tried her best to coax the girl out of the room. I couldn't decipher all of it, but the words I could make out from the girl—"scared" and "I can't" being among them—all had negative connotations, each of which cut me to the quick.

"Um…if you think it's not gonna happen…"

The moment I started speaking to Kano, I heard the door slam shut.

In front of it were Kido with the girl they called Marie, still hiding behind her.

The white hair that came down to her hips looked soft and fluffy, like the fur of some creature from the snowfields. I could image how nice it would feel if I buried my face in it.

"Ooh, great job fishing her out of there, boss."

Kano closed the magazine he was reading long enough to give Kido a light round of applause.

Kido returned to her original seat, the young girl sitting right in between her and Kano.

Up close like this, she looked like a doll come to life…Her eyes were a light shade of pink, her skin a paler white than even Kido's, and her long, mesmerizing white hair gave her the air of a forlorn woodcutter's daughter from a rustic folktale.

But she still tried to conceal her face from me, her eyes swiveling between random empty points on the table in front of her. She recited to herself "It's okay…It's okay…" over and over again like an incantation, and she must have known that I could hear it from here.

"Anyway, here's Marie. Sorry it took a while to get her out here."

The girl's shoulders tensed up when her name was called. Gingerly, she looked up at me.

"Shy" wasn't the half of it. As the new woman in town, I felt obliged to give the best first impression I could.

"G-good to meet you, Marie! I, uh, my name's Kisaragi! I guess we'll be living together for a little while, so…so I'll try my best to help out, so, uh, thanks in advance!"

Her shoulders stiffened once more when I began to speak, but apparently the message came through, because by the time I had finished, her expression was notably less strained.

"……"

But she was still frozen in place.

"Uh…Ha-ha-ha! So, uh, that's pretty much the story, so…"

To avoid diving headlong into silence, I made a feeble attempt at breaking the ice further. My lack of verbal skills made me all but defenseless whenever silence fell upon a conversation. I really need to buy a book on communication skills sometime…

Despite my expectations, however, the silence didn't last long.

"My…My name is Marie…It's, it's nice to meet you…"

She spoke very, very softly. It took a moment to realize that she was attempting to introduce herself.

Her eyes began to swivel around again, her white skin turning a shade of red all the way to her ears.

"I, um, I'll go make some tea!"

She had apparently reached her tolerance limit. Marie got up off the couch and hurriedly skipped over to the kitchen.

"Oh, um, no need to go to the trouble!"

Great. Just when I thought we had something going, she runs off on me.

"Man, look at Marie! What a trooper."

"I'll say. She's never talked that much with a stranger before, has she?"

Both of them had nothing but kind words for Marie's performance.

"R-really?!"

I couldn't hide my surprise at that very unconversational conversation being so worthy of praise.

"Well, you know, you're maybe the fourth person she's ever spoken directly to, so you probably don't know what the baseline is."

"The fourth person?! W-what does Marie usually *do*, then…?"

"What's she do? Hmm…Well, to put it in a modern way, she's kind of…unemployed, I guess."

Kano looked to Kido for support as he spoke.

"Yeah. Usually she never leaves her room at all, so maybe 'shut-in' is more appropriate."

"Oh…I, I see."

I suppose it was my fault for prying, but I felt a little sorry for Marie being freely called a shut-in by the very people she lived with.

"Though, you know, it's probably about time Marie started, like, *doing* something, don't you think? I mean, she's in her second year of life as a full-time acrophobic."

"We've been through that a thousand times. You know how she clams up for a while whenever we bring it up."

"Yeah, but…Hmm? Something up, Kisaragi?"

"Ah! N-no, no! It's…nothing…"

All this talk about a two-year unemployed shut-in was hitting a bit close to home. Kano probably noticed it in my helpless-looking expression.

He looked a bit puzzled, but apparently decided against prying any further.

"You know, maybe Kisaragi joining up won't be such a bad thing for her, huh?"

"Maybe. She seemed really excited about it."

"Huh? Excited? In…what way, exactly?"

"Well, I mean, look. She's gonna bring in two of her favorite teacups. She *never* lets us use those, so it's gotta be for you, Kisaragi."

Looking over toward the kitchen, I spotted Marie busily clinking and clanking away as she made a batch of hot tea. There were four white cups lined up on a nearby tray.

It was hard to tell if they were valuable at first sight, but two of them were plain, while the other two featured a fancy pattern of animal pictures.

"Ah…"

The sight honestly overjoyed me.

Here was Marie, a girl who wasn't exactly a social butterfly by any measure, bringing out her favorite cups purely for my sake.

It was no doubt her way of welcoming me to the household.

I could feel a pang of gratitude somewhere around my chest.

Thinking about it, it seemed like ages since I had last spoken with a girl anywhere near my age.

Thanks to my odd work hours and my body's unique "traits," I almost never found myself in a one-on-one conversation at school.

"You know, I was kinda worried at first, but I think she's really opening up to you. I just love seeing you girls interact with each other! It's about time we got a little feminine glamour around this —"

Kano looked over to Kido as he spoke, only to be greeted by her sullen, petulant expression.

I immediately recognized the cause of it, just as Kano said "Oh…" to himself.

"You think so, huh? Well, you got me, okay? Absolutely nothing ladylike about me, so…you want me to apologize, or what?"

"Whoa! No, no, no! I know you change your hair conditioner sometimes, Kido, and you've got that really frilly skirt you pose in front of the mirror wearing—*ow ow ow!!*"

Kano had to have seen *that* one coming.

"By the way, Kisaragi, don't you think you should contact the agency or your parents or something? We probably don't want this blowing up too big."

"Oh! Right, right! I totally forgot!"

"Ngh! Kido, get your hand *off* me first! I'm tapping out, I'm tapping out…!"

Without a twitch in her facial expression, Kido had clamped her vise grip around Kano's arm.

I should start by calling my manager…Actually, forget that. Too scary. But maybe send a message, at least…

Plucking my phone out of my pocket, I saw that the flood of calls, texts, and voice messages had ballooned to an apocalyptic torrent.

My stomach churned in pain.

How should I tell them about *this*? Thinking about it, this has been a pretty bizarre turn of events.

I decided to just let the words flow as I composed my message.

"I'm currently in the hideout of a group called the Mekakushi-dan. I think they can cure this condition I have. Please don't worry about me. Tell my family not to worry, either. I'm really sorr —"

—Getting this far into the message, I heaved the biggest sigh of the day so far.

My recipients would probably think I ingested some weird mushrooms or something.

Reading this out of context, this was plainly not a message a sane person would send.

"How do you think I should put this? This…situation?"

"Um…I don't know. I'm sorry…"

I turned toward Kido, hoping for some guidance, but all she did was sit there, looking distressed. Perhaps she felt indebted to me for accidentally taking me here.

"Mmm…Well, this message isn't gonna cut it. There has to be some better way of putting it…"

"The tea's all set to…Wa-a-a-*ahhh*!!"

Just as my eyes turned back to the phone screen to take another stab at my farewell message, tea rained down from above on my right.

A fairly sizable amount of liquid poured over my head and the phone.

"Yaahhhhhhh!!"

It was all so startling that, for the nth time today, I let out the loudest scream I could.

Getting splashed with all that tea was one reason, yes. The other major culprit was the "Sending…" window on my screen.

"Ahhh! Nooo! I, I'm sorry! I'm so sorry!!"

"I-it's fine! Just get something to wipe this up!"

In a panic, Kido pointed Marie, still sprawled on the floor, toward the kitchen.

I furiously tapped my finger on my phone's "Cancel" button. No response.

Nothing could be done any longer. The phone completed the send, and then, as if wrapping up the final task of its cursed life, quietly breathed its last. What had this girl done to me…?

"Okay, here's a—a-a-a-*ahhh*!"

This time, my head was draped with an unwringed, sopping-wet towel.

The bitterly cold liquid ran down my hair, pooling around my seat.

I looked around me, washcloth still atop my head.

There was Marie, white as a sheet, ready to cry at any minute—

and Kano, snickering, that smile still on his face—

and Kido, scratching her hair through her jacket hood, looking embarrassed.

—Man…What a pain. But, you know, it didn't really matter.

I was beginning to feel like all of this was just too much fun.
I hadn't felt this way in far too long.

This may be a bit (okay, *more* than a bit) of a twisted way of thinking,
but at that moment, I thought to myself: This must be what "youth" is like.
Is this how it feels when you're messing around with the guys in your school clubs?

No doubt the sun's blinding rays were still shining outside,
the whining drone of the cicadas still as loud as always.

On that summer's day, I made up my mind.
And to make my resolve clear, I said it out loud.

"—I swear I'll do my best for the Mekakushi-dan!"

When did it begin?
When did it all originally begin?

I was supposed to travel from the countryside to the house of Hiyori's relative for my summer courses.
That was what was supposed to happen, I think.

What was the name of that guy with the white hair in that house?
I seem to remember it being something really weird.

Not that I have any business saying that. My name—Hibiya—that's pretty weird to some people, too.

He was really tall and laid-back.
Maybe I should ask Hiyori. She probably remembers the name.

But I feel like I asked her a thousand times already, a long time ago.
What was that name again…? Ah, it doesn't matter.

Come to think of it, where did Hiyori go?
I know we left the house together.
Have I ever wound up by myself like this before?
I feel like I have…or maybe I haven't.

Huh…Now it's starting to rain.
I'm pretty sure this is the first time…

Amid my constantly repeating dream,
the unanticipated rain painted the town in a new light.
The cicadas that cried out so loudly up until now,
and the hot haze in the distance; they were both hidden today.
"Hey…You."
"Yes?"
"Did you come here by yourself?"
"No…I came with a friend, but we got separated."
"A friend?"
"Yeah. We're always together. But I'm starting to feel like I won't see her today…"
"I see. Do you want to?"
"…I do."

“Good. I wouldn’t worry, then. You, and her, you’re both…”

“…Where are you going?”

“Follow me if you want, but no regrets, all right?”

“All right.”

“Perfect. Let’s get going. I’m sure there are others waiting for us, ready to cooperate, just like you.”

“Cooperate…?”

“I know there’s something out there that their ‘eyes,’ and your ‘eyes,’ can see…”

“—So whatever you do, never forget about today.”

The water softly coursed down my body, lapping at each and every curve. It was the shower I had longed for ever since early this morning, but I never expected it under *these* circumstances.

Here I was, in a shadowy organization's secret base,
myself and my phone covered in hot tea,
deluged with apologies all the way to the bathroom.

It sounds all the more strange when put into text form. I suppose truth really is stranger than fiction…or a TV drama script.

Once out of the shower, I returned to the main room, wiping my hair dry. The three of them turned toward me for a moment, but quickly returned to normal.

The old clock hung on the wall ticked away, its pendulum swinging back and forth.

It was just past eleven thirty in the morning.

"Hey, thanks for lending me these clothes and everything…"

"Nah, nah. This was our fault in the first place. But, man, what a dilemma…"

"You sure said it…Ah! No! I mean, it'll be fine! It'll be totally okay! Right?!"

Marie had been incessantly apologizing for the past while, but even at this point, she still looked about ready to bawl if I so much as sighed.

"But…But…!"

Marie's hand was gripping a sealed bag filled with chemical drying agent—the stuff in those little "do not eat" bags. My phone, doused in tea a few moments ago, was safely ensconced inside.

After wiping the phone dry, they had whipped through all their bags of candy and other snack foods to salvage every packet they could. The opened snacks were laid out on the table like an hors d'oeuvre spread.

"I…I have to pay you back…"

"Pay her back? Where're you gonna get the money for that? You gonna sell your books?" Kido suddenly interjected, her body draped across the sofa as she read a magazine. That was all it took for tears to finally stream down Marie's face.

"Whoa, whoa! Take it easy on her, boss!"

"It's true, though. It's not like she has any way to pay you."

"Well, maybe not, but still…L-listen, Marie, you really don't have to worry about it, okay? There's no need to cry!"

I tried to comfort her, but to no avail. The tears continued to stream as she stood there, still tightly gripping the bag.

"More to the point, though, getting shut out from the outside world is pretty bad news for you, huh, Kisaragi? Shouldn't you at least, like, give them *some* kind of contact?"

Kano let out a very deliberate shrug, all smiles as always.

"Yeah…I guess you have a point."

That message I just sent was a disaster, no doubt about that.

I had the sense it was going to blow up into a massive story. It was already starting to get on the news. The afternoon news shows were all running ads with narration like "Fans Shocked at Megastar Idol's Sudden Disappearance!! Was She Kidnapped…or Worse?!"

"Do you remember any of the phone numbers? Like, your manager's, or at least your home phone?"

Kano had already looked up my agency's phone number. He tried giving a call, but never got anything but a busy signal. That seemed unlikely to change anytime soon.

"I…uh…I don't…"

"Really? Eesh, Kisaragi…"

"Well, I'm just…not good with numbers, okay? I…I know that if you add up all the numbers, you get fifty, but…!"

"Yeah, that's *real* helpful."

"Ugh…"

Ever since I woke up this morning, I felt like people had been taking pity on my stupidity.

"You know, the police are probably already on the move. If this keeps up, they might storm in here, like, any minute."

"Then we'll all be arrested for kidnapping, huh…? We sure could use that phone."

Kido sighed and looked toward Marie. Her shoulders convulsed as she unloaded yet another trickle of tears.

I could see the situation was serious, but for some reason, the two of them seemed to enjoy it. That, and bullying Marie.

Suddenly, Kano pounded a fist against his palm, a bright smile on his face.

"I know! We can just have Marie work as a day laborer until she gets the money to pay for a new phone!"

"Good idea. Let's see…Looks like there're some jobs directing traffic. Ooh, and they'll even take you if you don't have any experience."

Kido chucked the job-search magazine on the desk. It was open to a page showing a cartoon construction worker waving a fluorescent light baton to and fro.

Marie stopped crying at the sight, her face growing more and more devoid of color.

"Hang on, this job looks better for her. 'Get Fit on the Job! Work for Ishiburo Package Delivery! Hmm…That's the guys with the penguin logo, huh? The pay's pretty cheap, but hey, they're an equal opportunity employer!"

"Not bad. She could use a little muscle on her anyway…Whoa, wait, wait, wait."

Marie was quietly edging her way out of the room, the bag she so dearly clung to placed on the desk. Kido grabbed her by the collar before she made it, sitting her back down on the chair.

"Where were *you* going?"

Kido interrogated the poor girl, who seemed concerned less about the phone and more about the

intense, frightening danger she suddenly faced.

"I…I can't do it…that sort of thing…"

The magazine on the desk was open to an advertisement prominently featuring an illustration of a cute, pink penguin. It was apparently the mascot of the delivery service, a far cry from the picture spun by the ad copy. NO EXPERIENCE NECESSARY! MEN AND WOMEN WELCOME! IF YOU'RE STURDILY BUILT AND LOVE MOVING YOUR BODY, COME ON IN! You could smell the sweat just reading the ad.

"Uh…Don't you think you're both being a little hard on Marie?"

"No way! We're just trying to help her learn about the real world! Oh, wow, the available work hours run from six a.m. to eleven p.m.! You can start working immediately, too. She could save enough to pay for that phone in no time flat!"

Kano was staring directly at Marie, his smile really more of a demented smirk at this point.

Marie, for her part, reacted to every new stunning revelation with a light "Ahh!" or "Eep!" or whatnot.

There was something about this girl, apparently, that made it endless fun to pick on her.

"Look, that's enough! You're just being mean to her! Can't you see she's in distress?"

I took the job-search magazine off the desk. Marie piously looked up at me, as if I were some sort of goddess.

"Well, yeah, but if you ask me, I think it's time she learned a little about, like, how hard life can be. She can't stay cooped up in here forever," Kano, stretched out on the sofa, chimed in. Kido nodded her firm agreement.

But do either of *these* guys have a job?

"I…*I'm* working real hard, too…!"

For once, Marie finally fired back at them.

However, Kido and Kano both countered immediately, cutting her off.

"Huh? You mean that job making artificial flowers at home? That pays, like, five hundred yen a month, doesn't it?"

"F-five hundred yen?!"

I had to confirm I heard her right, unable to hide my shock at the idea of a job paying for maybe one Happy Meal monthly.

Noticing my reaction, Marie's face gradually turned red, presumably out of shame.

"I know, but…but I make sure every flower's made up right, so…"

"Look, you know you get paid, like, five yen per flower, right? You can't spend the entire day making three or four of them."

Kido sighed at the absurdity of it all.

Kano stepped up to deal another telling blow.

"You know, Marie, most normal people probably make, like, a hundred times what you do. Right, Kisaragi?"

"Huh? Me?!"

I could feel Marie's gaze upon me, pleading for my aid. But, honestly, at five hundred yen per

month, there wasn't much defending her job efficiency.

"Uhh…Well, I mean, everyone works at their own pace, I guess! I bet Marie probably does a great…job?"

"…Even though she gets paid in coins? One per month?"

"Even…even if it's one per month!"

I tried to stand strong against Kido's commonsense question. Tentatively turning toward Marie, I was greeted with a supreme look of satisfied confidence.

I had mixed feelings about it, but also a sense of relief. There was no doubt, though, that this girl's future was uncertain.

Kano sighed and turned to Kido.

"Well, if that's how Kisaragi feels about it, I guess she'll have to cover the phone costs, huh?"

Kido nodded silently.

"Right! Excellent! Boy, isn't that great news, Marie? Kisaragi's agreed to pay for the whole thing!"

"Huh?! Wait, when did I…? What?!"

I was violently thrown by this harrowing conversation derail.

"Oh, so you'll have Marie pay for it?"

Kano's face beamed a little too brightly for my tastes as he asked.

"…Ugh! I…I mean, I'll pay, but…"

"There! You hear that, Marie? Isn't that wonderful?"

"That settles that, then."

I had thought about covering the cost from the start, but now I felt like this whole discussion was one big trap. Was this how these people always treat each other…?

This group was *weird*, right down to the core.

"Uh…Are, are you sure it's really okay…?"

Marie still looked anxious as she stared at me.

"Y-yeah! Sure! Absolutely okay!"

The money I earned from my "work" wasn't managed by me. I was still too young for that. There was an allowance I could use for whatever, but I wasn't sure if I could cover the whole phone with this month's stipend alone.

But, thanks to not having any friends to waste money going out with, I had way too much saved up. Once I find someplace to withdraw it, that should—

"Ooh, I don't know, though…You think this is really enough, Kisaragi?"

"Well, we'll have to make do with…Hey! Why do you have my wallet?! When…How did you…?!"

Kano was nonchalantly rifling through the wallet I thought I had stowed inside my bag.

Checking inside the bag, I saw it definitely wasn't there. When did he take it…?

"Whoa! Man, Kisaragi, you should really start pitching these receipts! Also, wow, you eat a *ton* of dried mangoes, don't you?"

Kano placed all the receipts he snatched out of my wallet onto the desk. Kido joined the party.

"These show you eating them every day…alongside these dried shredded squid snacks. You trying

to strengthen your teeth, or…?"

"Yeah, totally. Oh, *eww*, what's this stuff you're drinking? Red bean soup–flavored…soda? You start buying it every day starting with this one. Is it *that* good?"

Marie tittered a little, looking from the side. My face felt so hot, I was ready to spew fire.

"Aaaaaaggghhhhh!"

In a rush, I snatched up the receipts from the desk, ripping the wallet out of Kano's hands.

"W-what are you *doing* to me?! You can't just go looking into people's wallets…!"

"Huh? Oh, uh…guess I just wound up doing it?"

Yeah, and you "just wound up" revealing my food and drink habits to the world, too!

I should've just bought a clubhouse sandwich and tea every single day.

"The squid and red bean idol, huh?"

"W-what's that mean…? What's so bad about that?!"

I looked at the receipts I had taken from Kano, wallowing in self-pity. Suddenly, Kano spoke in a much more serious tone.

"I dunno…Like, I guess you had to deal with a lot of stuff, didn't you? Sorry I kind of poked around in there."

"L-let's just drop it, all right?! Oooooh! Look at these snacks! That kind's pretty rare, isn't it? And such an attractive bag design, too! I can't wait to dig in…"

Attempting to change the subject any way I could, I picked up one of the bags on the desk that Marie didn't get around to opening.

It was a bag of dried, flavored radish slices. The front read THICK KELP SOUP STOCK FLAVOR A SNACK FOR HARD-BODIED MEN!

"Uh…yeah, go ahead. Dig in."

Kido's reserved response contrasted with Kano's uproarious laughter.

I wanted to crawl into a hole, have someone shovel dirt over me, then keep on digging until I hit the Earth's core.

"But…but red bean soup can be yummy, too…I like it a lot…"

"M-Marie…!"

Marie was making a strenuous effort to back me up.

I *knew* she was a nice girl at heart!

"Yeah, but in *soda* form?"

"Th-that might be kind of gross…"

Well, *that* sure blew up in my face.

I was utterly crestfallen after all of this emotional damage.

"All right, all right…I know I'm a weirdo, okay? That's why I could never make any friends."

Somehow I doubted that most of the country's teenage girls would carry around wallets jam-packed with receipts for dried squid strips.

"Oh, cheer up! There's no need to be down about it."

"Yeah, but 'Thick Kelp Soup Stock Flavor'? Ugh…my stomach…it hurts…"

"Will you stop laughing at me already…?! Oh! Uh, I'm sorry…?"

While I tried to tell off Kano, who was still holding his stomach and laughing his head off, Marie's shoulders convulsed as a fearful expression spread across her face.

"Yeah, sorry, sorry. Whew! Thought I was gonna die there for a moment. Anyway, enough chitchat. Ready to get going?"

"Huh? Get going where…?"

Kano stood up and stretched, arms high in the air.

"We need to, like, get you a new phone, right? There's a place right nearby here."

"Oh, yeah, that one…?"

Kido's response sounded distracted as she thumbed through a gadget magazine she had plucked from the rack next to the sofa.

"Just to be sure, though…Would getting a new phone help me at this point?"

"Well, I mean, you should be able to transfer your contacts, at least. Don't know unless you ask."

"Yeah, but…but if I go outside again…"

If I went outside again, *seriously* bad things would happen.

The next time I attracted a crowd like that, I had a feeling that running would no longer be an option.

"Oh, you'll be fine if we're along. Right, Kido?"

"…Pretty much."

Kano looked at my bewildered expression and gave me an excited smile.

"We showed you Kido's 'skill' just now, but that's just part of what she really is."

He continued to explain, arms open wide to emphasize his point.

"To make a long story short, Kido can control not only her own sense of presence, but that of anyone around her she wants. We call that her 'concealing eyes' ability. Basically—"

"Y-you mean she can make *me* disappear, too?!"

I raised my voice, more than a bit enthused at the concept.

"Not disappear, exactly. More like make your presence as utterly thin as possible, I guess. You probably already know how it works, actually. Like, it's not like you're just constantly attracting attention everywhere you go, right? You know you can do certain things, in certain ways, and that will draw people to you."

This did sound familiar to me. I could think of a few examples—the picture I drew during that class in elementary school, for one.

"In other words, you could take that, like, 'drawing eyes' skill and apply it to the outside world. Whether you're consciously aware of it or not, it gets set off and people react to it. Kido's skill can completely neutralize that, so you're gonna be just fine. You know, this may have been all Kido's mistake, but, like, maybe you were destined to be here all along, huh?"

Kido buried her face in her magazine, still embarrassed over the mix-up.

"A mistake? What do you mean, mistake?"

Marie looked toward Kano, a distressed expression on her face. He responded with another defiant smirk, like the one he gave her earlier.

Kano must really enjoy tormenting this poor girl, deep down.

"Well, like, look at her. I know she just spent the past little while bullying you, but really Kido's just a—"

"R-right! Right!! We all ready to go?! And don't worry about it, Marie. It's nothing."

With that, Kido tossed her magazine on the sofa and briskly stood up.

"Ready to…go?"

"Y-yeah. Just over to the phone store."

Kano seemed to suddenly tense up as he briskly answered Marie's question.

Kido, adjacent to him, must have been intimidating Kano with her presence, imploring him not to tell her.

It was an interesting glimpse into who positioned themselves where on the social totem pole around here.

"…Are we going by the park?"

"That park? Yeah, I guess so. Why?"

"Okay. I'll come along too. I…I want to bury something."

Kano gave Marie a blank stare as she stood up and went toward the kitchen.

Kido and I wore the same face, not expecting this reaction.

"Bury…? Did Marie have a pet or something?"

"God, if she'd lost a pet we'd have bigger problems than burying it. Anyway, she doesn't have one."

"Yeah. I doubt Marie could pay to feed it, for one. For two, she would've had to be, like, hiding it from us this whole time."

"So why is she…?"

As we discussed Marie's announcement in hushed tones, a clinking sound came from the kitchen. She was placing the pieces of the cups she broke while making tea earlier into a cloth bag.

"Oh…"

It was at that point that I remembered. Marie had taken the effort to bring out her favorite teacups for me. She had taken the effort, and it led to them breaking when she tripped.

Handling the shards of animal-print ceramic, Marie's face gradually returned to the state it was before she started bawling the first time.

"Huh. That's what she means?"

"Well, she really liked them, you know."

The clinking continued as she carefully transferred the pieces, one by one, from a plastic convenience-store bag into the festively patterned cloth sack.

This wasn't just a chore to her. It seemed like she was putting every effort possible into this, making sure it was an unforgettable moment.

"Um, can I ask a question, boss?"

"Mm? What?"

"Would it be all right if we didn't go to the nearest phone shop? Like, maybe if we went to a bigger department store with a phone section?"

Kido looked confused for a moment, but soon relaxed her gaze, apparently sensing my motives.

"Fine by me. We can go anyplace you like."

"G-great! Thank you so much!"

Kano flashed me a smile—a sincere one this time, I felt.

"Yeah, I'm all for it too. Marie's never been to a department store, either. I bet she'd really like it. And with you around, Kido, she'll be just fine, yeah?"

"Assuming Marie's up for it, anyway. Here, could you invite her for me?"

I headed for the kitchen, half-pushed by Kido.

By the time I arrived, Marie had already taken care of most of the large pieces. She stood there, wondering how to handle the tinier pebbles.

The littler pieces were undoubtedly too sharp for her to pick up by hand.

"Need some help there, Marie?"

Hearing a voice next to her, Marie turned, a bit startled.

"Huh…?"

"You'll hurt your fingers if you touch the smaller pieces. I can hold the bag, so how about you just pour them inside?"

"O-okay…"

After she consented to my offer, Marie handed me the attractively patterned cloth bag she was carrying.

The glass pieces inside weighed about the same as four cups.

She must have decided to bury the regular broken cups alongside her favorites.

I opened the bag wide while Marie emptied the remaining contents of the plastic bag into the sack.

"They must have been really important to you."

"Y-yeah…Mom gave them to me."

I hesitated for a moment. Judging by how Kano and Kido fretted over her future, I assumed tha Marie's parents were not a part of her life.

I had no way of telling if that was temporary or they were never coming back, but for now, at least, there were no family members close to her.

—I felt my chest tighten a bit at a memory I couldn't forget, one I recalled despite myself.

"Oh…"

"But it's okay. I'll make sure I don't forget, so…"

I was concerned she would start crying again, but when I looked, Marie had a gentle smile on her face instead.

The sight was enough to make me tear up a little instead.

But Marie didn't cry. She wouldn't let herself make a sad face right now.

"Well, that's great, that's great. Listen, would you like to go shopping with me afterward?"
I decided to plunge forward with the idea I had earlier.
"Shopping…? For the phone?"
"No, not that…If you'd like, I was thinking we could all go shopping for a new set of teacups."
The moment I said it, Marie looked right up at my face.
"A-a new set?! I can help choose, too…?"
"Of course! Wouldn't it be lots of fun if we could all drink tea with our matching cups?"
Marie's face turned bright with excitement, apparently delighted with the proposal.
"…Okay!"
"Really?! Wonderful. It'll be a great day out!"
"Uh-huh…! But how far are we going…?"
"Well, today we're going to the department store! It's like a whole bunch of different shops in one! If you come along, I bet it'll be a *ton* of fun!"
"The department store…?!"
Marie's face shone with excitement and imagination.
I had no idea this would make her so happy…!

I had thought this was the unluckiest day of my life, but weirdly enough, it was starting to get pretty fun.
A real shopping trip…The idea made my pulse quicken, too.

"I, I'm gonna go get ready…!"
Placing the cloth bag carefully on the kitchen counter, Marie scampered off to her room.
Watching her bound across the hideout warmed my heart, making a smile organically curl across my lips.
Oh…but look out, I don't want you falling again…

"Oh, did Kisaragi invite you along?"
"Y-yeah…I'm gonna go get ready!"
Marie's expression was one of pure anticipation as Kano spoke to her.

—Until Kano just *had* to keep talking.

"Well, great! Oh, man, are you gonna go out in *those* socks?! Pff…khhh…!"
Kano suddenly struggled to stifle his laughter, as if suddenly remembering some hilarious joke.
Socks…?
Did he mean Marie's "weird socks" they were talking about a while ago?
But that made no sense. Marie was barefoot in the kitchen.
As I thought it over, the stifled chuckling awkwardly stopped midway.
In fact, Kano himself stopped moving at all. It was as if time stopped for him alone.

A concerned "now he's done it" expression crossed Kido's face.

"K-Kano…? Is something wrong…?"

As I approached him, I noticed the change in Marie first.

She was a completely different girl from before, emitting cosmic waves of pure rage as her face tilted downward.

The long hair that flowed off her shoulders stood edge to edge, wriggling like a living creature. The *eyes* I saw through her hair were completely different from the light pink ones I knew…They were red, pure red.

"Aghh!!"

I shouted, surprised at this sudden transformation.

This obedient little girl I was just speaking with had a look of pure murder on her face, her hair writhing in midair.

"Ughh…You idiot…"

Kido rapped Kano on the head. Kano remained standing, completely unresponsive.

His expression remained firmly unchanged, like a store mannequin.

"W-what's this about…?"

"Oh, uh, Marie's 'locking eyes' can turn anyone who looks at her into stone."

"S-stone?!"

Kido knocked on Kano's head a few more times as she explained. The sight was so surreal that I had trouble comprehending her.

Turning people into stone was something on a wholly different dimension from being about to "draw" people's eyes.

This was something closer to magic.

Marie continued to stare at Kano, her breathing taut and rapid.

"What kind of…I mean, is Kano all right?!"

I hated to say it, but Kano, his face still straining in unbearable laughter, was a ridiculous sight to see.

"Nah. If he's like this, it's already too late. He's staying like this the rest of his life."

"…Huh?"

"Boy, that's sure a pity…Oh, well! I guess we'll just have to make him into a coatrack! Not that we even need one…" said Kido, her facial expression completely unchanged.

Kano…We had only just met, and *this* is how you leave me…?

But she was right. This kind of coatrack wouldn't look right in *anyone's* home.

"How 'bout we just throw this piece of junk in the trash…? Oof! Here, can you take the other end,

Marie?"

"Yeah…Let's get this garbage out of here…"

"—Yagh! What're you doing, Kido?! Don't grab me from behind like that! Ngh!!"

The moment the two of them were about to drag Kano off, he suddenly came back to life.

Without missing a beat, Kido buried a knee into his side.

I had figured from Kido's sarcasm that he would unfreeze sooner or later, but *that* blow probably hurt a lot worse. He collapsed to the floor, groaning.

"What is your *problem*?! Stop shooting your mouth off when we're trying to go out!"

"S-sorry, boss…"

Even though he had to feebly reply to Kido from his curled-up position on the floor, Kano's smile was still there.

"You go get ready, Marie. It's gonna close if you don't hurry."

"Wha?! Oh, no! I'll be back in just a second…!"

Marie skipped over to her room.

Kido shrugged bitterly.

"Um…Is Marie…? What *is* she?"

"We don't really know much either…but apparently she's descended from a Medusa."

"A M-Medusa?! As in turns-people-into-stone, *that* Medusa?!"

"Yep. I couldn't believe it myself at first, but no way she's human, anyway."

Faced with one outrageous concept after another, my expression went completely blank.

I had heard the name Medusa before, at least.

Not that I knew anything anyone else didn't. A legendary monster, snakes for hair, petrifies folks, etc., etc.

I had just seen one, right here, using her skills before my very eyes.

"She said her parents had told her from birth that they were a family of Medusas. Her mother really *could* stone people for good, supposedly, but I guess all Marie can do is stop them in their tracks for a bit."

"But…but this is so unreal…"

"Mm-hmm. I hear you there. But there she is. Besides, we're kind of similar, you and I. Ignoring whatever science is behind it for the moment, some people have some pretty weird abilities. You know that by now, right?"

"Y-yeah, I guess, but…"

"—Do you hate her?"

"…Huh?"

"Now that you know she might not be human, does that make you hate her?"

"…No. I'm hoping I can be her friend…!"

"…Great. In that case, don't think about it for now. We'll tell you about it sometime later. You can tell us about yourself, too, if you'd like."

"O-okay…!"

"I…I'm ready, but…"

Marie poked her face out the door she'd entered before.

But she refused to go out any farther, an embarrassed look on her face.

"What's the problem? Let's go."

"A-all right…"

Marie opened the door and left her room, revealing…nothing out of the ordinary.

The socks that Kano couldn't resist making fun of were plain, old, normal white socks.

"Huh? Is there something…odd with those socks at all?"

"Nah, those are normal. But the ones she came out wearing earlier were those real loose, baggy socks."

"*Those* socks…?!"

I tried to imagine matching her current outfit with the long, baggy socks popular back in the nineties. It would have been…unusual.

Marie, her face reddened, stormed up to Kido.

"W-why did you *say* that?! I put on normal ones this time…!"

"Mm? Sorry. She asked, so…Those oughta be just fine."

"B-but…!"

Marie's eyes darted around the room. She had to have been hurt by her friends picking on her all day.

But what could have driven her to try on socks like those…?

"I mean, I…I saw them in your magazine, Kano…"

"His magazine…? You mean this?"

Picking up the magazine Kano was reading earlier, I was greeted by the sight of young women dressed in outfits that were all but parodies of street fashion a few decades ago. The headline above them read KICKIN' IT OLD-SCHOOL! NOSTALGIA FASHION BLOWOUT!

"It was really cool, so I…I just…"

There was some real retro fashion sense in this modern-day Medusa's mind.

"I spent all that time knitting them, too…"

Oh, man, and they were even *homemade*.

*

Making our way through the tight path to the main street, we were greeted by the usual hustle and bustle of city life.

We could see the restaurants that lined the opposite side of the road, all filled to the brim with families and large groups of customers.

I didn't think I would be back here right after attracting that mob of onlookers, but everything was completely different from before.

I wasn't hiding, I wasn't wearing a disguise, and yet not only was a crowd not forming around me—nobody even *spoke* to me. Pedestrians didn't so much as bat an eye as they went past, eyes forward, walking in a straight line.

"This…This is so novel."

"Yep. I'll bet. Not so much to me, though. But when the hell is Kano going to notice us?"

Kano, walking a little ahead on the sidewalk, suddenly turned around.

He strained his eyes, as if searching for a contact lens on the ground. A moment later he confidently strode toward us, a look of recognition finally crossing his face.

"Yeah, you guys are perfect. I mean, I had to, like, seriously look for you."

"Sure *took* you long enough."

Kido sighed, as if stood up for a date.

"Hey, what do you want *me* to do about it? I couldn't see you."

The smile remained firmly planted on his face as he grumbled.

"Wow…You really couldn't. It's like we're totally invisible…"

"Nah, it's not like that. It's like…I dunno, I can *see* you, but I can't will myself to *notice* you? That sort of thing. Pretty unnerving when you're on the receiving end of it."

The way Kido described it, she could erase the "presence" of anything she wanted within a two-to-three meter radius.

She couldn't literally make us invisible, however, so everything remained seemingly normal from our perspectives.

"Wow…! Can I try finding you, too?"

"What're you, crazy? If you left my side, you'd be right back where you started…Come *on*, Marie, you're too close to me! Gimme some space!"

Kido wrested Marie away, keeping her from nervously clutching the bottom of her jacket.

"So…soooooooo many people…"

"Well, yeah. We're on a busy street. Anyway, everything's okay, I guess. On with the mission."

"O-okay!"

Hearing her put it that way made it feel like we really *were* on some secret infiltration mission. I was starting to get a little excited.

Of course, the mission—to sign up for a new phone and buy some teacups—wasn't exactly black-ops material.

Kido and Kano led the way as we began to walk down the wide street. It was like another world.

I was walking freely, completely unobstructed. It was like watching a movie, except this one was being shown 360 degrees around me.

Nobody around us seemed to notice our presence, and I almost had to be careful not to bump right into them. The sensation of seemingly turning invisible gave me a sense of profound relief like nothing before in my life.

The road we walked along was laden with fast-moving traffic, something that did distress me a little. Concerned, I looked down at Marie, walking side-by-side with me. She was white as a sheet. I hadn't noticed until now, but I could hear her deep in the midst of her "It's okay…it's okay…" incantation.

"Um…Kano? I…"

"Huh? What? You don't have to whisper."

"I don't know…I just…"

"It's okay to talk like normal, you know. Hell, you can even start singing if you want. How did your debut single go? Like, 'my peach-colored' something-or-other?"

"Aaaaghhh!! Don't talk about *that* all of a sudden! I'm gonna punch you!"

"Whoa, when did punching enter the picture…? Anyway, did you notice? You just shouted, and nobody even flinched."

"Oh…You're right. But that's not what I'm asking about! Marie looks like she's having a lot of problems."

Marie continued to recite her would-be calming mantra.

Even if she were visible, I was confident people would still go out of their way to avoid her.

"Ah…Yeah, I figured she'd be like that. Hey, uh, Marie? Hello? Yeah, that sure ain't good."

Kano began to walk backward, waving his hand in front of Marie's face. She remained unresponsive, her gaze transfixed at some faraway point in space.

I was unsure it was completely safe for someone like Kano to walk backward down a busy street.

Don't we have to watch out for other people? They can't see us at all, right?

"Oop. Hang on. Halt."

Just as I was about to voice my concern, Kano suddenly stopped.

Kido stopped walking at the same time, causing Marie to bump right into him.

"Huh…?"

Before I could ask what was going on, a child on a bicycle cut right in front of us from the left. If we kept going at our previous pace, it would have been a nasty collision.

What's more, the kid had come in from a blind angle. I was looking straight ahead and had not even I noticed him.

"…Oww! Marie!"
"Ngh…I, I'm sorry…"
Kido turned around to find Marie bowing in apology.
"Ugh. You really need to pay more attention."
"But I'm scared…! All these people…"
"Yes. All these people. I told you, that's why you need to be more careful. What are you, stupid?"
"I, I'm not stupid…!"
Marie tried to counter, but her voice trailed off toward the end.
"…Well, all right. Let's get going."
Kido began to walk. The rest of us followed her.
Marie appeared calmer than before, but now she was whining under her breath at Kido—"Why'd she have to say *that* to me," and so on.
Kano, meanwhile, kept walking ahead, carefree as always.

"Say, Kano, how did you notice that kid on the bike?"
"Hmm? Oh. I dunno. Just a hunch."
"Just a hunch…? Can you see the future or something?"
Honestly, at this point, I would have accepted it if he replied "Yeah, so?" to me. Instead, he responded with a corny joke. "The future?" he said. "Boy, wouldn't that be nice? Then I wouldn't have to read my horoscope!"

The traffic began to grow thicker as we drew closer to the department store down the street.
A lot of the cars seemed to be leaving the complex, too. I spotted a giant stuffed animal in the backseat of one sedan on the opposite side.

"Hey. We gotta cross this intersection. Stay close to me."
Kido stopped in front of the stoplight, pointing the crosswalk out to us.
We needed to be careful. Cars were turning in and out from both sides.

"I'm…I'm scared to cross…"
"Mm? Oh, it's all right. Just stick to Kido's side, okay?"
"Yep. Just not so close. You're…you're dragging me down…"
"But I…I can't…!"

Marie was tightly hugging Kido, as if preparing for her big German suplex finisher.
Kido pried her off, clasping Marie's hands around the bottom of her jacket instead.
I found myself naturally sidling up to her as well.
Seeing the trucks passing right in front of us, I could feel myself gripped by an uncertain stress.
"Okay. Free over there."
"All right, let's go. Follow me."
After the light turned green, Kido let two cars in front of her make a turn before setting off.
Kano followed along behind her.

I checked a few times for oncoming cars, but since we were far from the only pedestrians crossing, my brain shifted over to the task of dodging them instead.

Once we crossed safely, we saw just a bit of the department store peeking between the buildings in front of us.

Navigating another crosswalk beyond, we hung a quick left. It was a straight shot after that.

I had passed nearby the store many times before, but every encounter gave me a new appreciation for how enormous it was.

I always thought it looked like something out of an epic RPG or something.

"Wow. This joint looks like something out of, like, an RPG, doesn't it?"

Kano suddenly struck up a conversation as we waited at the crosswalk for a green light.

"H-huh? Whoa! How did you…?!"

"Uh…what's the deal? Did I say something weird…?"

The sheer spot-on timing of it was enough to shock me into losing control of my motor functions.

I could tell that Kano was plainly unnerved by this.

It seemed like just a simple coincidence, but to be honest, it seemed like the guy was reading my mind. It scared me.

"Oh, uh…Ha-ha-ha! Nothing that important."

"Mmm? Well, you sure weren't acting that way. Oh, were you maybe thinking the same thing or something?"

"Whoa! How did you know that…?"

That, or he really *could* read my mind.

So was he picking up on all the crazy thoughts that have crossed my mind so far today…? The idea sent a chill up my spine.

"Oh, you were? It was just kind of a hunch, really. Guess great minds think alike, huh, Kisaragi?"

"C-could you knock that off? It's really weird."

I had to give Kano my honest take. He drooped his shoulders dejectedly, obviously put off by it.

Or maybe he's *not* reading my mind after all? This was getting confusing.

"Oh, Kidoooo…You're the only one who really understands me!"

"Get away. I'll kill you, I swear."

"Oh, all *right*…"

Kano had tried to approach, but then Kido sent him reeling back through sheer force of will.

There's the boss for you. She knows her troops well.

Once the light finally turned green and we crossed the street, the department store was almost upon us.

As we walked down the opposite side of the street from before, Kano and I marching forward in a straight line, I noticed a large white van passing us by.

Come to think of it, I wonder what's going on with my drama shoot right now.

I bet my manager was livid.

The agency might have every employee out on the streets, combing the city for me.

I really need to get in contact. We need to talk this over, and I need to get my true feelings across…

"A-are you all right?"

"Huh?"

I looked where the voice came from, only to find Marie worriedly staring at me.

"Ah! Y-yeah! Yeah, I'm just fine. Did…did I really look that bad?"

Marie lightly nodded, not even trying to hide the truth.

Yes. I think I am on the path to finally making a friend.

I have a child here who worries about me. The normal me, not the girl on the idol pop charts.

"I…I'm sorry. But, hey, we can see the department store now, Marie! There's bound to be all kinds of neat stuff in there. Isn't it exciting?!"

"Huh…? Oh! Oh, you're right! Ooh, it's like an enchanted palace!"

The line of buildings to the right suddenly gave way to the grand sight of the department store.

It was a grand, opulent-looking edifice. Marie's appraisal was far from an exaggeration.

I had thought before about visiting the amusement park up on the roof, but it always felt a little awkward to go by myself.

But today was different. The whole gang was here. Maybe we'd have a little time to see the sights.

I could palpably feel the excitement bubbling in my heart.

"It sure is, isn't it? And it's even *more* amazing inside!"

"Ooh, I can't wait!"

Marie's eyes were wide open and filled with wonder, like an excited child.

Sneaking a glance at Kido, I could see her smiling a little.

I began to feel a little embarrassed. My eyes were probably just as wide and childlike as hers.

I walked up to Kido's side and spoke, trying to keep my voice soft.

"Why don't we all go shopping together, boss?"

"Mm? I don't really have anything I need…"

"Aw, but we already walked all the way over here. Let's go look at some clothes! I could pick a cute outfit for you!"

"You…?! I should probably pass."

"Oh, you don't have to be polite! You know, I've got a pretty good eye for coordinating outfits, so…"

"Well, no, I mean…Your outfits, they're kind of garish. It's not really my thing, so…Uh, something wrong?"

We had just approached the entrance to the department store complex.

I hadn't noticed until we were practically touching, but I saw someone familiar standing there.

You're kidding me. That's impossible. Why would he be *here*, and why *now*, of all the times…?!

I doubted he was aware of any of this, but either way, I needed to get out of there, fast.

"—Kisaragi? Something up?"

"My brother…"

"Your…What? Your *brother*?! How…Whoa!"

My feet tripped over each other in my haste to escape, sending me careening into Kido at full speed.

I threw her off balance, sending her straight in the direction of my brother, Shintaro.

"Ow!"

Oh, no. I'd gotten so freaked out that I'd just made things worse.

"A-a-a-*ahhhh*!"

Marie, just as surprised as I was over these events, had majestically stumbled to the ground herself, even though she was nowhere near us.

Kido quickly gathered herself together and turned toward my brother.

"Uh…umm…So, uh, I'm sorry for—"

It was almost sad, hearing my brother try to interact with a woman using that limp, mumbling voice of his.

He also had his head down practically to the ground, all but groveling to her. It surprised all of us.

You have *got* to give me a break. I sighed, my body racked with regret at spurting out "my brother" to my friends.

"…Oh, no biggie. Sorry about that."

After quickly apologizing, Kido turned back toward me.

Standing back up straight, my brother suddenly spun his head around, confused, before putting his hands on his knees and hyperventilating.

Oh, man. What a pathetic-looking creature *this* is.

All he did was bump into a woman, but he was acting like he'd just walked straight into a grizzly bear.

He didn't seem to have noticed me, thankfully, but that was probably because Kido was focusing her powers on the rest of us.

That, or maybe all that staring at his PC monitor finally made him go blind.

Either way, I brought my hand to my face, too embarrassed to look.

"Ugh…this is awful…"

"Are you for real, Kisaragi? That guy's your brother?!"

As we returned to our neat little line, Kido—cool as a cucumber as she dealt with Shintaro—broke out in a cold sweat as she addressed me.

"I…no, he's not…He's not. Please."

"No, I definitely heard you use the word 'brother' just now."

Kano, a cool observer to the whole catastrophe, chimed in as if on cue.
"Ngh…! Uh, hey, Marie, are you okay?! Sorry if I surprised you…!"
Marie had already stood back up, although there was a tear around the knee of one of her socks.
"Agh…! Are, are you hurt?!"
"Awww…This was the first time I wore these, too…"
All Marie seemed to care about right now was her socks.
I doubted she was too traumatized.

"Whew! That's good. Kano, why are you smirking at me like that? You're creeping me out!"
"Huh? Oh, no, no, I didn't mean to…Uh, don't worry about it, okay?"
Kano looked exactly like a kid who had just found a new toy to play with.
He is *such* a creep.

"Arrrghhh! This is just the *worst*! What could he possibly be doing here…?"
"S-so that was *your* brother over there? Really?"
"Please, boss, stop reminding me! I don't want to see him! Ugh, I hate this…"
"O-oh…! Uh, sorry."

I looked back at my brother, apparently chatting with his cell phone by the entrance gate.
Probably talking with her again.
But what would bring them here?
He hadn't even tried to set foot outside of the house in nearly two years…

"Look, let's just get going, okay? How's that sound, Marie?!"
"Uh, yeah…Are you mad, Kisaragi?"
"No! Not mad at all! You hurry up too, boss!!"
"Um…okay…"
Let's just get in the store before my brother decides to follow me in.
Pushing Kido through the gate, I scrambled inside the department store as quickly as I could.
"Huh? Hey, do I get a push, too?"
Kano stuck his nose between us, beaming brightly, an inquisitive finger pointed at himself as he walked alongside me.
"Kano, why don't you just go home and die?!"
"Aww…Hey, maybe your brother wants to hang out with me, huh?"
"Aaahhhhh!! Just kidding. Never mind! Come with me!!"
"Oh, don't be so shy, Kisaragi…If you want me to come along, like, say so, huh?"
Repressing the murderous urges welling up from my stomach, I silently headed inside the department store.
Let's just get to the seventh floor. They've got to have phones in the electronics section.
My brother might not even be going inside in the first place. Besides, this store is huge. Even if he *did* enter, no way would we be heading for the exact same place.
I just have to get away from him, and I'm safe.

We gotta get inside. We're here to have a fun shopping trip, dammit!

*

The afternoon sun shone through the glass windows that lined the walls.

The Obon holiday had brought a lot of families out of the house. Small children were playing around with the giant refrigerators on display, messing with the doors and hiding inside the freezer.

I wished I could run around and shout like they could. Reality can be cruel like that. Sometimes I wonder if I've been possessed by some kind of demonic spirit.

"K-Kisaragi…?"

"Mmm? What is it, Marie?"

"Eep! Uh…uh, cheer up, okay?"

"Oh, don't worry, Marie. I feel great! Isn't this fun…? Heh-heh…"

"Oh…uh, yeah…sorry…"

The seventh floor.

Up-tempo music filled the space, blaring out of speakers placed around the home-appliance section.

Kano launched into a cheek-stretching yawn, acting oddly fatigued.

He was apparently already tired of waiting for us. That was his problem, not mine.

We had decided to take the stairs up to the seventh level. The elevators and escalators were too dense with people for Kido to have confidence in her skill. We haven't really disappeared, after all. If someone touched us, that would immediately break the spell, so to speak.

I tried to hurry the gang along, but Marie could only take the steps two at a time for short spurts before running out of breath. We were forced to take frequent rests, costing me untold amounts of time.

The moment we finally reached the seventh floor and headed for the phone section, my brother strolled out of the elevator.

I had thought this was a good day. Let me amend that. Today was absolutely, positively, the unluckiest day of my life.

Some might find all of this romantic, the idea of me reaching the exact same destination as my brother on his first outing in two years. If the goddess of romance were here right now, I was ready to clock her.

Incidentally, Kido would have to relax her ability a little bit if I wanted to replace my phone.

By "relax," she explained to me, I would be noticed by others, but still wouldn't stand out that much.

I would be just another face in the crowd, too humdrum and normal for anyone to recall me afterward.

But, as Kido put it, my brother would be another matter.

When it comes to family members and other people I shared a great deal of time with, if I made my presence even a little bit known, there was every possibility that he could sniff me out.

My brother was far too obtuse and thick-headed for that, I figured, but just to be doubly sure, we decided to wait and scope out the scene until he went away.

So here we were. Waiting for my brother, currently shuffling around in front of some stupid grenade-shaped water heater he surely had no intention of buying anyway, to log out of my life.

"Why did this have to happen…?"

I murmured it to myself softly as we waited, four in a line, in a relatively inconspicuous aisle.

The Mekakushi-dan, on a covert mission to replace my cell phone, sidling this way and that to keep passersby from blundering into them. In my eyes, there was no simpler way to portray hell on earth.

"You know, it's like you've got the worst luck or something…"

"Tell me about it. I'm really feeling it today, too…"

"So what do you think he's here to buy?"

"I have no idea…Probably something for his computer. Who knows why he'd go out and buy it himself, though…"

"Huh…Maybe it's the holiday. You know, Obon? And the shopping sites are closed or something."

"Oooh…That sounds pretty likely, actually. But he just *had* to come here right now, didn't he…?"

"Well, the two of you *do* look kinda alike. Like, maybe you're both groovin' on the same wavelength or something?"

"…I will hit you, I swear."

"Okay, maybe not *that* much alike. My bad."

"Ugh…I'm really sorry about this, Marie. I promise I'll make it up to you, okay?"

"Oh, no…This is all my fault anyway, so…Besides, this is really fun."

"Nghh…What is *taking* him so long?! Just buy whatever crap you need and *go* already…"

"Well, you know, it's only been about five minutes. Just hang tight!"

"I can't! I want to contact my agency and go shopping with Marie…! Ughh!"

"Yeah! I want to go shopping, but I can wait, okay? So don't worry!"

"Oh, Marie, you are *so* nice to me! Wanna go to the sweets section later? Hmm?"

"Okay…! Oh, here comes someone."

Marie moved away from a customer walking down the aisle, a large backpack slung behind him.

This customer didn't seem terribly keen on browsing, though. He came to a stop in the middle of the aisle, removing his sack and peering inside.

"What's with this guy? Why isn't he going anywhere…?"

I looked to my side, only to find Kano looking suddenly tense.

Kido's brows were furrowed, apparently noticing whatever Kano had.

"Kido, this is bad."

"Yeah. Kisaragi, Marie, let's get out of here."

"Uh…okay…?"

We stepped back into the main aisle, Kido and Kano's faces still racked with apprehension.

"What now? Should we fall back?"
"You get Kisaragi's brother over here. Try not to scare him too much."
"Got it. You take care of these guys."
"Sure thing. Hurry," said Kido, at which, Kano disappeared down the side aisle my brother had just stepped into.

"Um, boss? What did you mean by 'get my brother over here'? How am I gonna find a cell phone if we're…"
"That guy's backpack stunk of gunpowder. I could smell it from here. He's probably carrying weapons. I think I saw the barrel of a gun in there. Explosives, too."
"Huh?"
"…Ah, crap! The guy who just walked down the opposite aisle must be with him. Hey, once Kano comes back, we're getting out of here!"
"W-what…? Kido, what's going on…?"
Marie was clearly shaken at Kido's sudden change of tone.
Probably less than half of what she told me had made it inside my head.
I hadn't gotten the full message, but the atmosphere had gotten so tense, so quickly, that I felt pangs of anxiety shoot up and down my body.
My mind was having trouble keeping up. But the sight in front of me was shockingly clear as it burned into my retinas.
"Boss…Look!"
"Dammit…Just follow what I say for now, all right? We're probably in a…"

Suddenly, there was a loud, echoing bang.

Screams rose up from across the floor, as if on cue.
"Ah…!"
Marie clung to my side, startled.
The screams slowly, gradually grew in volume, forming an avalanche that buried the entire show floor.
The man in the aisle from earlier removed his shirt, revealing an outfit resembling a special-forces military uniform. Grabbing a gun from the backpack, he leaped out from the aisle.
"Ugh. Too late…?! Whoa!!"

As I stared dumbfounded at the unfolding events, Kido grabbed both Marie's and my arms, pulling us deeper into the showroom.
Right after our momentum sent us to the ground, a large iron shutter fell over the spot we had just stood, completely shutting us away from the elevators we were facing.

"Hey! You okay?"
"I, I think so…! Are you all right, Marie?!"

Marie, still in Kido's arms, was quivering with fear.
Luckily, she still had it together enough to follow Kido's orders as we ran to a narrow aisle and hunkered down.

"Calm down, Marie. It's gonna be all right. They haven't noticed us over there…but…"
We could still hear screaming scattered across the showroom.
In unison, there were loud footsteps as customers ran around, searching for an escape.

"Great…We're probably dealing with terrorists. They're well trained, and they've got everything planned out, too. I'd guess they're going to take everyone on this floor hostage."
I felt goose bumps on my arms.
My brother was just on this floor.
Which means that, right now…
"Shintaro…!!"
"Hold it! Kano's over there right now, okay? If you go, you're gonna get caught!"
"But…!!"
I allowed myself to imagine the worst-case scenario. Tears began to well in my eyes.
He may be *that* kind of brother, but he's still the only one I have.
A shut-in, an unemployed geek, a thoughtless baboon; but he's still family!

Why did all of this have to happen?
I had finally found a glimmer of hope that my body could be cured of…whatever it was.
I had finally found a chance to make a new friend, a *real* friend.
This must be what I get for causing so much trouble for so many people today.
Maybe this whole thing, and all the people caught up in it, is my fault.

"Kisaragi! Just stay calm for me. If they're taking them hostage, they're not gonna just kill them. There's no point jumping in there unless we get a better bead on the situation, right?"
"R-right…I…Sorry."
I tried to wipe away the tears, but they kept welling up on me.
It was the second time I'd cried today, and given all the fun I'd had up until now, it felt like the first time in years.

What are we supposed to do now…?
After an extended silence, we heard a clamor of tense voices on the other side.
It was the police, apparently, but the shutter had left them helpless.

Marie was curled up on the floor, shaking in fear.

Kido's eyes were closed, as if she was thinking something over.

"Agh…!"

"Eep…!"

Without a word of warning, Kido suddenly sprang forward. Marie, surprised, jumped out of her way.

The cause was the jingling cell phone inside Kido's jacket.

"A text…?!"

Kido extracted her cell phone, muscles still tensed.

A moment later, her face loosened up into one of near disgust.

Marie and I were both bewildered. Her expression was a major mismatch for the situation we were in.

"Um…who's it from?"

"From that idiot…"

Kido tossed her phone at me.

The screen was still showing the text. Kano's name was up top.

"Subject: Got caught!

Hey, how's it going over there? We're managing over here somehow! They've got us all sitting in a row! It's like, wow, first hostage experience! Oh, they got Kisaragi's big brother, too! And he's sitting right next to me! Here, check out the selfie [IMAGE ATTACHED]! Anyway, that's the situation here!"

I read the message text, then opened the attached photo. There was my brother, hands bound, back to the camera. Kano was front and center behind him, flashing a peace sign. Nervous-looking hostages filled in both sides of the picture.

It was an absolutely perfect shot. Not even the slightest bit out of focus.

"Boss, is…is something wrong with his head, or…?"

"Pretty much. He's beyond help at this point."

"Uh, K-Kido? Is he…is he in trouble?"

"Trouble? Hell, Marie, he's mentally unstable. I need to take him to the doctor so he can get his brain dissected."

"…How is he typing on his cell phone if he's been caught?"

"Ooh, wow, you're right, Kisaragi! Everyone around him's all tied up, but he's giving us the peace sign and everything!"

"The terrorists must've thought he was too much of an idiot to waste the rope on."

"……"

Silence fell over the three of us. Suddenly things seemed far less serious.

For some reason, I was seized by the notion that I was in the middle of some screwball comedy about a bunch of bumbling crooks.

"So, uh…boss?"

"…This is still a pretty bad situation. I think."

"Aw, but Kano's having so much fun!"

Marie had a point. I sighed as I stared at the photo, which for all the world looked like it was from a particularly crazy night during senior field trip.

What kind of situation *is* this, anyway? I was starting to lose my grip on reality.

"Really, though, why isn't he tied up? Stupid or not, they'd do *that*, at least."

"Kano's bound up along with the rest of them. Or at least it *looks* that way. To everyone else."

"Ooh, so he's disguised himself again?"

"Wait, what? What do you mean…?"

"To put it simply, he has the 'deceiving eyes' ability. He can make them see something other than what's actually there."

"I don't…How does that…?"

"Well, imagine you find this cute kitten on the street. You take it home, and whoops! It's actually a huge Rottweiler. It's kind of like that."

"Aw, that's such a cute example, Kido!"

Marie giggled to herself. Kido turned red in the face. It was a rare sight to see her this embarrassed.

"No, I…Quit it, Marie. W-we're not getting any pets, okay…?"

"So he can make…optical illusions or something?"

"Yeah, that's close enough. It doesn't have much range, though. He can only do it on himself."

"Huh…"

"Remember when we were walking here? He didn't look it, but he was actually running lookout duty for us the whole time. That's how he spotted that bike."

"…Oh."

So when I thought he was walking backward, he was actually watching the whole street for us?

Did he not want us to notice, or…?

"That's pretty amazing, but still…uh…"

"Oh yeah. He's still an idiot."

The man with his fingers in a *V* in the photo was flashing a healthy, contented smile, only serving to further emphasize how silly the whole thing looked.

But I had to hand it to him—he *did* calm us down. There wasn't even a sniffle from Marie any longer.

He might be a more amazing person than even he lets on.

Especially compared to that idiot brother of mine behind him. All *he* ever does is make me worry.

The first time he goes out in forever, and look what happens. We're *never* gonna get him out of his room now.

As I looked at the photo, pondering over this, an idea sprang to mind.

The idea quickly began to spawn other ideas, and before long, a plan began to form in my head.

"Ah…ah…!!"

"Mm? What? What is it?"

"With your 'concealing eyes,' and my…"

"Huh? What are you going on about?"

Kido's vote of complete nonconfidence made me feel a tad abashed, I had to admit.

But this plan I had just conceived might be our only chance out of this situation.

"Listen, boss. I'm not totally sure, but I think we might be able to beat these guys."

"…What do you mean?"

"Well, it's like this…uh. It's kind of hard to put into words…Can I borrow your cell phone? I want to brainstorm a bit while I try writing it out."

"Oh? Sure, but…"

"So, here's the basic idea…"

As I tapped away at Kido's cell phone, a man's voice suddenly sprang forth from the department store speakers. The terrorist leader, I imagined.

"A one-billion-yen ransom…? Man, these guys are pretty stupid, too."

"One billion *does* sound a little stupid, doesn't it? It's like what a child would imagine when he tries to think of a really big pile of money."

Perhaps because of the sheer lunacy we had just seen among the hostages, the terrorists themselves were starting to look pretty dumb as well.

"Hey, uh, how much is one billion?"

"Imagine you made two flowers a day, Marie. Then do that for the next one hundred million days."

"One hundred…huh? I don't get it."

"Ah, forget about it…"

I struggled to write out my plan in concrete form as I cast a less-than-focused ear toward the terrorists' verbal manifesto.

Using the reply window from Kano's text, I silently typed away at the software keyboard.

"Uh, hang on, give me just one second…This goes here, and…"

"Take your time, but…are you sure you really got something?"

"Yeah, I think so…Wait. Huh? Oh, okay. Uhhh…"

Halfway through writing it out, I realized I had forgotten the last part.

Uh-oh. Ending too early would lead to casualties, a lot of them. I had to avoid that, no matter what…

"Oh, no…Maybe not?"

"What?! Don't give me *that*!"

"Ahhh, just give me another second…ummm…"

"Hey, hey, what're you two talking about?"

Marie, listening in from the side, suddenly ducked her head close to mine.

I hadn't noticed before as I spoke with Kido all this time, but Marie was acting remarkably calm at this point.

"Oh, um…just kind of putting together a plan of operations, so…"

"Oooh, an operation? Coooool…!"

"Hey, shut up for a second, Marie. You're not helping."

"Aww…"

"Hmm? Well, hang on a second…My 'drawing eyes,' Marie's 'locking eyes'…"
"Huh? What was that, Kisaragi? Hey, tell me too!"
"…Yeah!…Yeah, I think this could work! All set!"
It was finally all typed in. I showed off my cell-phone treatise to Kido, with Marie craning her neck to read along.

"Hmm…Whoa, hang on. Who's this girl showing up midway?"
"Uh, it's someone I know, and…well, it's just like I have it written, so…"
"And she'll *do* that?"
"She will…or should…probably. No, definitely! B-but that's what I want Kano to check on!"
"Oooh, that's my name there at the end!"
"So, so is it all right if I just text this to him…?!"
"Hmm…assuming she's actually over there, then maybe…"
"Huh…?"
Kido remained where she was, mulling things over within her mind. Suddenly, she looked back toward me.
"No…This is a good plan. Assuming she's really there, I mean. It might be the only course of action we have right now…Not bad, rookie."
"…Great! Thanks, boss! Here, let me send this…!"

I was elated.
None of the compliments I've received in my life ever made me happier, maybe.
I was so glad I joined the Mekakushi-dan.

"Hey, um, what's the operation? I don't get it."
"Oh…uh, I'll give you a signal! So just stick close to me until then, okay, Marie?"
"Um? O-okay! I'll try to be ready!"
Marie made two fists, trying her hardest to make a tiny, waifish "Let's *do* this!" muscle flex for us.
She and I needed to work in perfect tandem for this operation to have any chance, but there was no time to rehearse. All I could hope was that things would work out once we got started.
I was still a tad nervous, but it was going to work…We had to *make* it work!

A new text arrived on Kido's phone.
It hadn't been that long since I sent mine, but it was from Kano nonetheless.

"Subject: Fun!
Kisaragi, your plan sounds so fun! I think the girl you were talking about is here, too. I heard her voice earlier. Such a brave lass! I'll try to make sure, but can you get closer without getting caught? Also I had some time to kill so I took another selfie—"

Once I made it to that point, I clicked "yes" on "Delete?" without even thinking about looking at the attached photos.

"I think it's A-OK on his end!"
"Yeah? Good."
Kido had probably assumed Kano's text was just as insipid as the last one.
"But do you think we'll be safe if we try getting closer?"
"As long as we don't bump into anyone, no problem. But keep a sharp lookout. They're armed with guns."
"Right!"
It was time to begin operations. Bunching together, the three of us emerged into the main aisle.
Looking across the showroom, I saw the hostages gathered in front of the wall.

"Wow…they really *were* taken hostage, weren't they? It didn't really feel real to me until now."
"Me neither. Don't go too far away from us, Marie."
"I won't!"

Earlier, Marie had been terrified of the crowds, but now that we were facing actual, literal terrorists with real guns, she seemed more or less fine. I was starting to think she might be something pretty special.

Getting as close as I could, hugging the edge of the aisle, I finally reached a safe angle to spot Kano and my brother sitting on the floor.

"Ugh. That fool's grinning ear to ear. At least *try* to conceal yourself, you idiot."
"Look at Shintaro. All serious like that…He's usually a massive wimp, too…I have this sneaking suspicion he's thinking the same thing I am."
"Yeah? Maybe you resemble each other in more ways than one…Marie, what are you doing?"
"Oh, uh, I thought this looked really neat, so…"

Marie was carrying a handheld electric massager.
Judging by her expression, she must have thought it was some sort of weapon.

"…Sure, fine. Put it back later, okay?"
" 'Kay, I will!"
"Ha-ha-ha…Right. Let's go around through this aisle."

Ducking into a smaller side corridor, we saw a stubble-bearded man, the apparent leader of the group, sitting on a bench. He was playing with his cell phone as he seemingly idled away the time. The confidence he exuded indicated that everything was going according to his devious plan.

"That's the main guy, isn't it? He sure looks like a meanie."
"Yeah, it's gotta be. That beard makes him seem positively deranged."
"Wow, he's scary…"

He likely wasn't expecting a gaggle of young women critiquing his looks as he sat there.

Still, this was it. A terrifying criminal mastermind, right before our eyes.

The stubbly, unkempt beard only served to complete the "vicious, rampaging maniac" image.

"Oh, there's Kano…"

"You just noticed *now*?"

"Yeah. I went and got this first, so…Whoa! Huh…? A-a-a-*ahhh*!!"

"Hey, what're…?!"

As Marie held the massager into the air, she tripped over the electrical cord she had been dragging behind the whole time. As she tumbled to the ground, the massager flew in the air, straight for the stubble-bearded man.

"Aaaahhhhhhhhh!!"

Kido's and my scream sounded out in perfect harmony. We tried to reach for the massager, but it managed to strike the man right on the back of his head.

The man's expression instantly twisted in pain. Just as it did, Kido slid in, catching the massager just in time before it clanged to the floor. The deed done, we all scurried back into a side aisle.

"Are you *stupid*?! Do you want to *die* here?!"

"Eep…I, I'm sorry…"

"Phew…I thought for sure we were dead. I didn't think you'd actually see all those flashbacks and everything…"

Sitting down in the aisle, we could hear the stubble-bearded man's minions groan in pain as their leader flew into a psychotic rage.

We're really sorry about that, minions…Not that you don't deserve to be punished, but…

After a moment, another text from Kano reached Kido's phone.

"Subject: Good to go!
Your bro says if he gets a chance it'll be 100 percent OK! This is starting to get fun! Oh, and that thing you just did…It was amazing, lol."

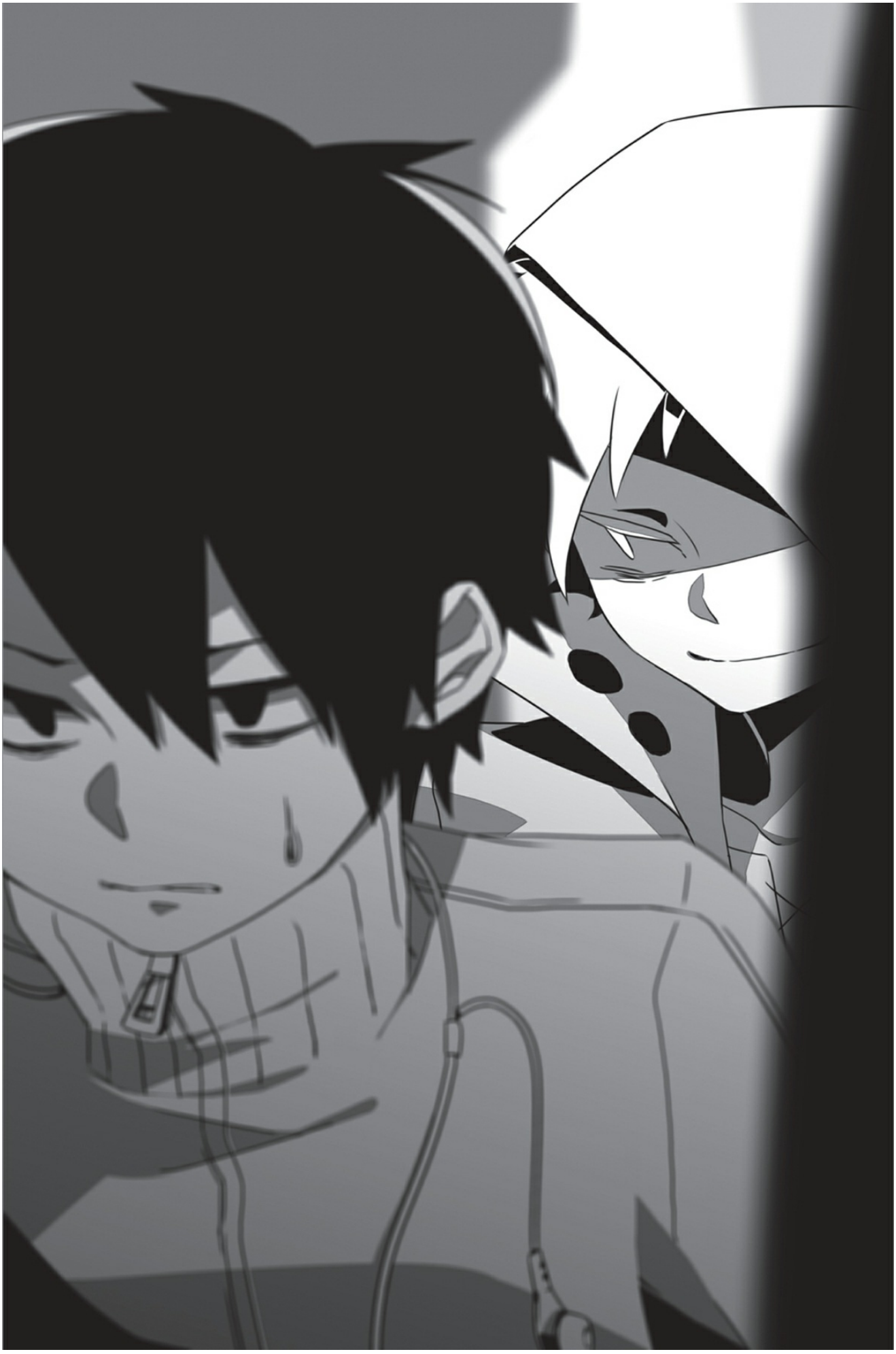
Looking up from the aisle toward the hostages, I spotted my brother, his face still oddly solemn. Waiting for the right chance I supposed. A grinning Kano sat behind him.

The text continued:

"Anyway, I'm starting to get bored. Wanna go home. Oh, and don't worry, I told your bro to wait until the beard guy starts broadcasting again."

"I think it's all good over there. Let's keep this operation going!"

“All right…I’m ready!”
“Good. I really don’t want to see any more of that bearded guy…!”
“Hey, um, don’t you think I should apologize to him…?”
“Look, don’t go away from me until I say it’s okay, all right?”
“Uh, okay!”
Marie’s hand was clamped upon Kido’s jacket, just like before.
“Well, here we go…”
“Uh-huh…Whoa! He’s got another message?!”
Just as we had walked into the main aisle, the PA system came to life once more.
“Huh…?! He’s too early! C’mon, Marie! Hurry!”
“Wha? Huh…? Ahh!”



We made our way toward the TV section, me taking the lead while Kido half-dragged Marie along with her.

Cutting across the main aisle, we reached the opposite side of the stubble-bearded guy and his men, the hostages located between us.

I could see several dozen big-screen TVs on display across the right-hand wall.

"Great! We're in ti—"

The next sight that crossed my eyes was the still-enraged stubble-bearded man picking my brother up by the hair.

"Sh-Shintaro…"

"Wait! I told you, don't go by yourself! You're the only one who knows how we're timing this thing!"

"…!!"

She was right. But look at him! Right in front of me…!

"…K-Kisaragi!"

"Huh…?"

Without warning, Marie had grabbed my hand.

"I don't really get it…but it's all right!"

She applied more force to my hand as she continued, eyes pointed straight at mine.

"…This is gonna *work*!!"

The moment she said it, all sound disappeared from my world.

I could feel an intense heat from within my eyes, as if every nerve in my body was pointed toward my vision.

Suddenly, I could tell exactly where the *eyes* of every person in the showroom were looking.

"…Okay!"

I took a deep breath and focused.

There were nine terrorists on this floor. I could easily spot their positions from here.

"Boss! The forty-two-inch TV, third from the left! We'll start with that!"

"Got it. Marie, let's go."

"Uh, okay…!"

The three of us lined up in front of the television I marked out, placing our hands behind it.

Now it all comes down to timing.

And I, more than anyone else, knew the exact moment people's *eyes* would be upon us.

"…for life…"

…Keep waiting…hold on…!

"I hope all you bastards get shut into a jail cell for life!"

Shintaro was suddenly being pretty cool for someone who was normally so useless.

The moment his voice echoed across the showroom floor, all eyes focused upon him.
All those *eyes*, and now I can *draw* every one of them!
"Now! Go!"

The television smashed to the ground with a loud crash.
At that moment, everyone focused on the TV's shattered carcass.
The moment every single one of them began to gasp, we knocked over the speakers lying beneath it.

"Where next?!"
"Next is…There! That shelf!"
"…That's more taking a potshot than attracting attention, no?"
"Ha-ha…Maybe a little."
The stubble-bearded man approached, pistol in his hand.
"There somebody in—?!"
"Two, and *three*!"
On three, we all kicked the merchandise shelf over in unison.
"Ngh! Whoa!"
An avalanche of heavy electronics flew off the shelf, effectively burying the man.
"Now…!"
Looking across the collapsed shelf, I saw my brother stand up and start running.
He ran right past my side, not giving me a moment's notice, a stern look of resolve on his face.
"—You're up, Ene."
I found myself murmuring it out loud.
There was no way I'd get a response. I wasn't expecting one.

I heard my brother call for Ene as her image floated across screen after screen.
Just as I thought it was all over…

—I heard a single gunshot.

"…?!"

Turning around, I saw my brother on the ground in front of the computer.

"…Huh…?"
"Dammit! They got him…!"

A large motor rumbled to life, and the shutter began to clatter its way upward.

"…Shintaro!!"
My brother had fallen facedown. He wasn't getting up.
Kano ran up to his side.
"Come on, Kisaragi! The shutter's open! Hurry!"
"—!!"
Once the shutter was about eight inches open, I could see the feet of the police squadron as they prepared to storm in from the other side.
Kido, noticing them, let out a panicked yelp.
The showroom floor was the loudest it had ever been.
Several terrorists pointed toward the shutter, shouting something in loud, frazzled voices.

If the shutter kept opening and a gun battle erupted between the cops and the terrorists, we could have dozens of injuries on our hands.

"Kisaragiiiii!"
"I know…!"

I need to get my brother out of here. Now. I have to do this!

"Marie!"
"Yeah!"
"…Let's go!"

I nodded to Kido, and then she released her ability from me.

At that moment, I could feel the *eyes* of everyone in the area, including the terrorists, focus upon me—no meaning to it, no reason, no matter of preference; just nothing but unrelenting stares.

"This…this is Kisaragi. Momo Kisaragi. Sixteen years old.—And I'm a pop idol!"

—Silence.

At that moment, my "drawing eyes" had ensnared them all.

"It's all you now, Marie!!"

Before my eyes, Marie began to walk forward.
She stopped right between myself and all the eyes pointed toward me.

Marie's "locking eyes" locked upon every gaze except for mine. Her hair began to writhe, and with her deep, deep red eyes, she said:

"Sorry."

—It sounded almost like a magical time-stopping incantation.
"Charrrrrrrrge!…Ah?!"

I could hear the shutter clatter. A chaotic drumbeat of footsteps spontaneously erupted.
The police squadron were past the shutter.
But not only were the hostages safe—the terrorists offered them zero resistance, their eyes still fixated upon a single point in space.

Nobody was there.
Or, to be exact, no one could recognize the presence of anyone there.

"Blindfold complete, I guess."

Kido sighed raspily in apparent relief.
Her eyes had a red tinge to them, the fatigue all too clear on her face.

"…! Shintaro!"
I ran up to my brother, lying on the ground nearby.
"…Kano! How is he?!"
Kano, watching over him, had a profoundly serious look on his face, like none I'd seen before.
"…Sadly…"
No…! It *can't* be…!!
"—Sadly, I think he just fainted. Must've gotten, like, grazed, you know?"

My brother was muttering in his sleep, his face pained. "Give me a break…" he moaned. "I just had a crazy impulse…"

…Ugh. He acted so *cool* just now, too. I take it all back.

—My idiot brother was just that all along. An idiot.

The police squadron had the situation with the terrorists fully under control, although their statuesque behavior was an obvious surprise to them. It was understandable. Even the hostages sat completely motionless.

"Hey! You all right? Hey! Hello?!"

"Just…Just get them under arrest! There's one under that shelf, too! Get him secure!"

As the squadron fanned out across the showroom floor, Kido, Kano, and I congratulated one another on a mission well done.

"That was some pretty impressive thinking, you know? Like, getting everyone to focus on Marie like that."

"Yeah…I figured Shintaro would get the shutter open for us, but I didn't want the terrorists to start trading fire with the cops. So I was trying to figure out how to keep everyone where they were, and then I remembered Kano getting petrified like he did, so…"

"Huh. Sounds like that dumbass actually came in handy."

"Hey, quit being so mean! Oh, did you see the photos, Kido? You know, the ones I sent?"

"Deleted 'em."

We could all breathe a sigh of relief now. The police, their terrorist mop-up work complete, were now frantically trying to figure out how to get them moving and talking again.

"Well…that's that, isn't it?"

"Yep…You did good, Kisaragi. It's all thanks to you."

"Huh? Aww…heh-heh-heh. Oh, speaking of, where did Marie—"

Realizing that Marie was no longer nearby, I took a look around, only to find a terrifying sight unfold before me.

Marie, electric massager still firmly in hand, was being pelted with a barrage of questions from one of the police officers.

"Aaaagghh!!"

Just as before, I shouted alongside Kido in unison.

"That stupid little…! She went to put that thing back!"

"Oh man oh man oh man…Now what? This is pretty bad, isn't it?!"

"Ha-ha-ha! That's the massager she bopped that stubble-bearded guy with, huh? Like, of all the weapons she had to pick! She's a comedic genius! Oh, man, I'm gonna bust a gut…"

"Will you shut *up* for a minute?! Dammit…Now what…?"

Kano fell to the floor at the force of Kido's well-timed punch.

As we bickered with one another, Marie was gradually surrounded by a herd of officers.
She was doing her best to plead with them about something, looking ready to cry at any moment.
"Uh…boss, did Marie just point at us…?"
"Oh, you have to be *kidding*—"
"W-whoa! They're coming this way! Ah…Dammit, Kano, stand up! You're in the way!!"
"You knocked…the wind…outta me…"
"I…You…Ugh, just get *up*!…Oh no…"

The moment after Kido groaned pathetically at his assailant, one of the approaching officers tripped over Kano's body. Shouting in abject surprise, he flailed for balance before falling flat on the floor.

"Let's…" "Let's…"
"Run!!" "Get outta here!!"

I took off right alongside Kido as I made a beeline for Marie.
She finally noticed me once I reached in between the cops to grab her hand, an expression of relief spreading across her face.
I could hear the officers left around her shouting things like "Where are you going?!" and "Wait, little girl!" but I was in no mood to stop running.
But what now…?!

Just as I felt my mind beginning to panic, the showroom floor was suddenly filled with noise. Marie's petrification had finally run its course. The policemen immediately turned their eyes to the crowd. Kido was ready for it.

Presumably we had gone unnoticed once more.
One of the officers looked back. "She's…*gone*?!" he blurted out apprehensively.

"Kisaragi! We can't stay here! Let's get going!"
"R-right!…Oh, but…!"
"…Kano!! Pick up Kisaragi's brother and get moving!"
"Whaa? Man, what a pain in the…er, nothing! No pain whatsoever! Like, I can't*wait* to carry this dude around!"
"That's a bad cover-up job, Kano…"

Thanks to the ominous fist clenched above Kido's head, Kano was kind enough to carry my brother away.
As he did, I could hear my brother murmuring, "Nnngh…Give me a break, man…" into Kano's ear, over and over again. It made me pray for sudden deafness.

"Oh! Wait!…Ene! You there?"
I took the cell phone connected to the computer and was greeted by a cheerful girl's voice.
"Ohh! Is that you, Momo?! Wow, are you out shopping, too?! What happened to my master?!"
"Uhh…I'll explain later, okay? Do you mind coming with us for now?"
"Oh, absolutely! To the amusement park?"
"Uh…no, not exactly…?"
"C'mon! We're going!"
"O-okay!!"

I ran as fast as I could for the stairwell.
What on earth did I even *come* here for? I still don't have a new phone, and we didn't so much as *look* at any tea sets.

Of course, if I *did* accomplish anything here…
I looked toward Marie. Her breathing was already accelerated from all the excitement.
"Hey, Marie?"
"Y-yeah, Kisa…I mean, Momo?"
"—!…You know, I'm really starting to *love* this day!"

Marie looked confused for a moment. Then she beamed at me. "Me too," she said softly.

"…Thanks!"
"—Hey! Momo, Momo!"

I heard Ene's voice from the phone in my pocket.

"Mm? What is it, Ene?"
"What's with you two? Is it one of those *yuri* things? You know, girl-on-girl romance and—"
I shut off the phone's power and stuck the handset as deep as my pocket would go.
" 'Yuri'? As in lily flowers? Ooh, they're so beautiful, aren't they?"
"N-no! Forget about it! It's no big deal, Marie!"
"…?"
I started to sweat, this time for reasons besides our running pace.
The utter lack of tact that Ene showed on a regular basis may be one of the few things she and my brother have in common.
"All right! Start going down!"
Just as we reached the stairwell, I heard a mighty sigh behind me.
"Uh…are you really expecting me to carry this guy all the way down? This is the seventh floor!"
"Yep. And then outside."
Kido's reply was enough to even make Kano's face turn desperate.
"Gehh…"
"I'm sorry I have such an idiot brother, Kano. Let's, uh, try to take it slow down—"

"I'm telling you, it was *her*! Momo, in the flesh! I'm not lying to you!!"

Just as I made the suggestion, I began to hear ominous-sounding testimony as the police interrogated the hostages. We exchanged worried glances.

"She's got to be somewhere nearby still! I swear, she *saved* us!"

The voices gradually grew louder, ignoring the officers' attempts at preserving the peace.

"Looks like taking it slow isn't an option, huh?"

"I, I'm sorry…um…"

"Ughh…What a day this turned out to be…"

"I, I can't hold him anymore…"

The sun filtering in through the windows was as powerful and punishing as always.

It was still chokingly hot outside, no doubt.

The cicadas had to still be blaring as loudly as they could, and I could already picture the haze rising up off the white-hot asphalt.

It was enough to fill me with more than a little bit of dread, but it was far, far different from the kind I felt before.

August 14th.

No way am I ever going to forget what happened today.

EPILOGUE

August 15th. The end of a long, long day was at hand.

I'd have never guessed we would actually spend all of it at the amusement park.

Ene was one thing, but having my sister and her friends join me was something I never could've predicted.

Something had to have gone terribly wrong somewhere.

*

Going back to this morning for a sec.

I'd awoken feeling much more refreshed than I should have, given what I'd experienced the previous day.

If I found myself in a hospital bed…that sort of thing I could follow.

Instead, I woke up in a room within a secret hideout populated by Medusa and this invisible (?) guy; and what's more, they had apparently saved my life; and what's *more*, my sister had joined them somewhere along the line.

…I'm sure you have no idea what I'm talking about, but don't worry.

You're far more clued in than I'll ever be, trust me on that one.

The recap my sister gave me was so bizarre that it required a long Q&A session afterward, and even then I was still in the dark about most of it.

But those guys my sister called her friends…Talking to them, I found they were actually pretty nice.

Of course, given that I chiefly talk with a whacked-out demented AI girl day and night, I might have pretty low standards.

Either way, though, that Kido girl has a good head on her shoulders.

She made a mean breakfast for me, and I can picture her running a pretty tight family if she wanted.

…If you can ignore that ice-cold gaze, she might be the most normal one out of all of us, including me.

It was a crazy group overall, but apparently they're helping my sister out with her "eye" problems. They're real easy to get comfortable with, too. After all, these were the first people ever that my sister introduced as "friends."

Ene, on the other hand, was giving me a lot of grief.

I had no idea she and my sister were connected to each other…

Ene didn't share anything from my private repository, did she…?

Ugh…She totally must have…Man…Cut me a break…My sister will never respect me again…

Even now, I am obsessed about my sexual proclivities getting exposed for all the world to see. We spent the whole day at the amusement park, and *that* was all I could think about. To be frank, I don't exactly remember much of the stuff we did.

All I did was sit on this ride, that ride, the other ride, following Ene's instructions to the letter.

Of course, maybe that's not a bad thing, every now and then.

I haven't felt that way in a while.

*

After we left the amusement park, we kept walking around for a little while.

I began to wonder what kind of shut-in life this girl I was carrying around led.

I never thought I'd meet someone physically weaker than myself…

"Hey, sorry about that. Guess Marie got herself a little too excited in the heat."

"Wow, Shintaro, this is, like, your big break, isn't it? Giving a piggyback ride to a *real girl*! It might be your last chance forever!"

"No kidding. My brother's a big wimp *and* an anime perv, so this might really *be* his last chance. But, boy, wasn't that amusement park fun, Ene?"

"What a *trip*! I particularly liked how my master threw up in the middle of it, too! I'll copy the photo over to everyone once we get home!"

"Ooh, way to keep a sharp eye out, Ene! How 'bout I trade you for pics of some of Marie's creepier moments?"

"Ha-ha! Nice one, slit eyes! You're on!"

"N-no…No, don't show her…"

"Huh? Hey, if you're awake, why don't you walk by yourself? Shintaro's probably about ready to collapse."

"Just…just a little farther…"

"Ha-ha-ha…Huh?"

"Mm?"

"…That an accident?"

As we took the first street off the main drag, we noticed a crowd forming in front of a small city park.

An ambulance had just arrived on the scene, a pair of grim-faced paramedics cutting through the throng with a stretcher.

Between all the people, we caught a glimpse of a young man, about the same age as us.

He looked worried, hands on the ground, as he stared into the face of a boy lying next to him.

It was hard to make out much of the kid, but he couldn't have been more than…say, ten or so?

"…Huh. Pretty young."

"You think he's hurt…?"

Kido and Kano bounced assorted theories off each other.

I couldn't see any obvious injuries on the boy, but he was definitely unconscious, lying listlessly on the ground.

But there was nothing much we could do for him.

As we passed by, not giving it any further attention, I noticed a change in Ene's behavior.

“…!”
“…Ene? What’s wrong?”
“…Konoha…?”
“Huh? What was that? Ene?”
The boy was carried into the ambulance, the young man climbing in behind him.
The siren lit up as the ambulance began to drive away from the scene.
“…Momo! Can we go chase after that guy just now?!”
“W-wha?! Why?!”
“Just do it! Please, hurry…!”
“Sh-Shintaro…?!”
“Ene, what’s up? Did something happen?”
“…Why? Why would he…?”

August 15th. The five p.m. children’s bell rang out from bullhorns strung up across town…

—And, for all of us, a long, long “day” was finally about to begin.

AFTERWORD

"A Story that Makes You Want to Cover Your Eyes"

Hello. This is JIN.

How did *Kagerou Daze: In a Daze* treat you?

This project came about when I was invited to write a novel that linked up with "Mekakushi Daze," my first album. I based it largely off the story elements of four of the tracks in that album.

Going forward, I'm planning to write out the stories from the rest of the songs in future novels.

Of course, if this novel winds up being a flop, I might end up writing an (only somewhat) sexy high-school slice-of-life comedy starring a harem of totally normal girls.

…Not that I would complain too much about that, though.

This novel marks the first time that the characters from the songs receive full names. I think I did a good job making them sound neat, giving them last names modeled after the Japanese words for flowers and so forth.

As I was researching these names, I came upon a type of rose known as "chin chin."

Rather chic name, isn't it? It reminded me a bit of "chin chin," which is how you refer to a…uh, rather less elegant part of the body in Japanese.

Apparently "chin chin" is how you make a toast in Italian, too.

I can only guess they got that from the sound of the glasses clinking against each other.

Getting back to the novel, writing it was a pretty arduous process.

I thought it was going to kill me, in fact.

Working on a novel and a new album at the same time, with assorted live events thrown in here and there, made for a packed schedule. I didn't even have any time to enjoy my chin chin.

As a result, now that I'm free and have more time on my hands, I'm spending some quality time with my chin chin right now while I write this afterword.

In fact, I've been loving on my chin chin so much, it's taken nearly two hours to get this far.

Sorry I'm such a slow writer.

Oh, I'm talking about the rose, by the way. Got that?

By the way, if you look up the chin chin on Internet rose databases, they'll talk about how it has a "faint scent." Elegant indeed. Like it's afraid to expose its true self, you could say.

All this talk about chin chins reminded me of something else. There's a kind of snack food in

Nigeria that's called chin chin, too. It's these little balls of dough, fried up so they're like tiny round cookies.

I like that name a lot. It makes it sound so…I don't know. Deluxe.

Kind of funny they'd give that name to a food, though.

I'd love to take a trip to Nigeria sometime, taking in the chin chins (roses) while scarfing up as much chin chin (snack) as my mouth could take…Truly, the ideal way to spend an afternoon.

…Oooops, out of space!

That about wraps up this elegant, high-class afterword. Hopefully we'll see each other in the afterword of the next volume…assuming we get the chance!

Thanks, as always, for your continued support.

JIN (Shizen no Teki-P)

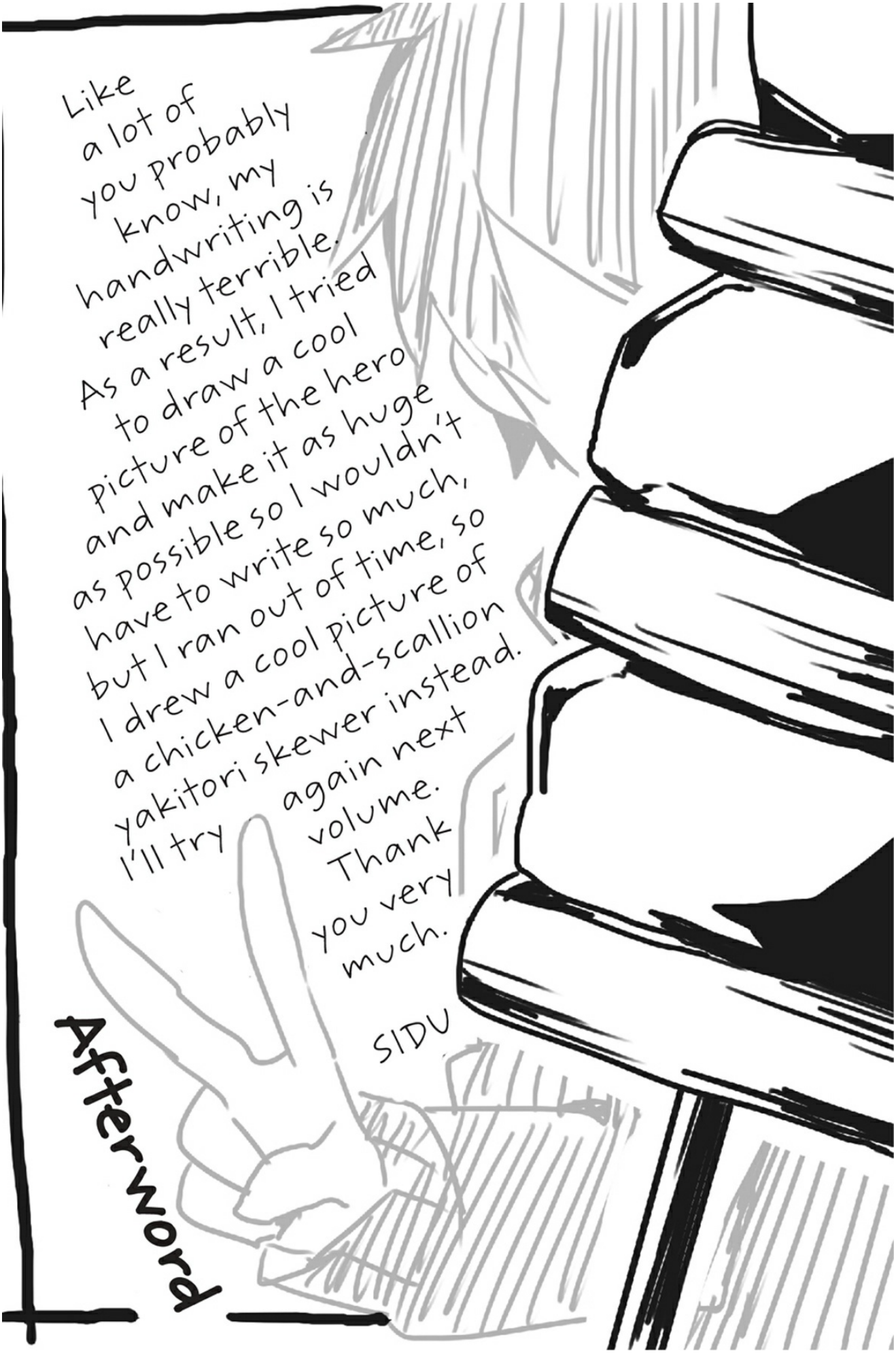
CONGRATULATIONS ON THE KAGEROU DAZE -IN A DAZE- LAUNCH!!
@RYUSE
I AM A HUGE MOMO FAN.
CONGRATS ON ALL YOUR HARD WORK, AND CONGRATS ON THIS NOVELIZATION! WHAT A FEAT! LOOKING AT THE WORLD JIN, SIDU, AND WANNYAN CREATED, SEEING THE LIGHT OF DAY IN ALL THESE DIFFERENT FORMS MAKES ME BOTH HAPPY AND A LITTLE CHAGRINED. BUT STILL! I'LL KEEP CHEERING YOU GUYS ON! KEEP WORK-ING HARD!
* I HANDLE THINGS LIKE THE ICON DESIGN ON THE OFFICIAL MEKAKUSHI-DAN TWITTER ACCOUNT. IF YOU DIDN'T KNOW...

Congratulations on the Kagerou Project's first novelization!!

As a fellow creator, JIN's works always makes me gnash my teeth in frustration. As a fan, though, I always enjoy checking them out.

I hope you'll keep creating new stuff that gets people excited and having fun!!

Ishiburo


Afterword
Like a lot of you probably know, my handwriting is really terrible. As a result, I tried to draw a cool picture of the hero and make it as huge as possible so I wouldn't have to write so much, but I ran out of time, so I drew a cool picture of a chicken-and-scallion yakitori skewer instead. I'll try again next volume. Thank you very much.
SIDU

congrats comment *

@wannyanpu

CONGRATULATIONS!

Kagerou Daze: In a Daze is finally on sale! What sort of ridiculous situations will Hibiya get into in the future...? Better not take your eyes off for a minute!!!!

Thank you for buying this ebook, published by Yen On.

To get news about the latest manga, graphic novels, and light novels from Yen Press, along with special offers and exclusive content, sign up for the Yen Press newsletter.

Sign Up

Or visit us at www.yenpress.com/booklink

JIN (SHIZEN NO TEKI-P)
ILLUSTRATION BY SIDU
KAGEROU
-IN A DAZE-
DAZE